

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

Author: **EDA**

Illust: Kochimo

VOLUME
5



VISIT...

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"...WELCOME."

**"THE FOLKS FROM
SYM AND JAGAR
ALL LEFT, RIGHT?
EVEN IF YOU STICK
AROUND IN THE POST
TOWN, NOBODY ELSE
WILL BUY GIBA MEAT,
YOU KNOW,"**

I SAID WITH A SMILE.

**THEY WERE CLEARLY
RIDICULING ME, BUT
THEY WERE ALSO
CUSTOMERS FROM
THE WEST, LIKE I'D
WANTED FROM THE
VERY START.**

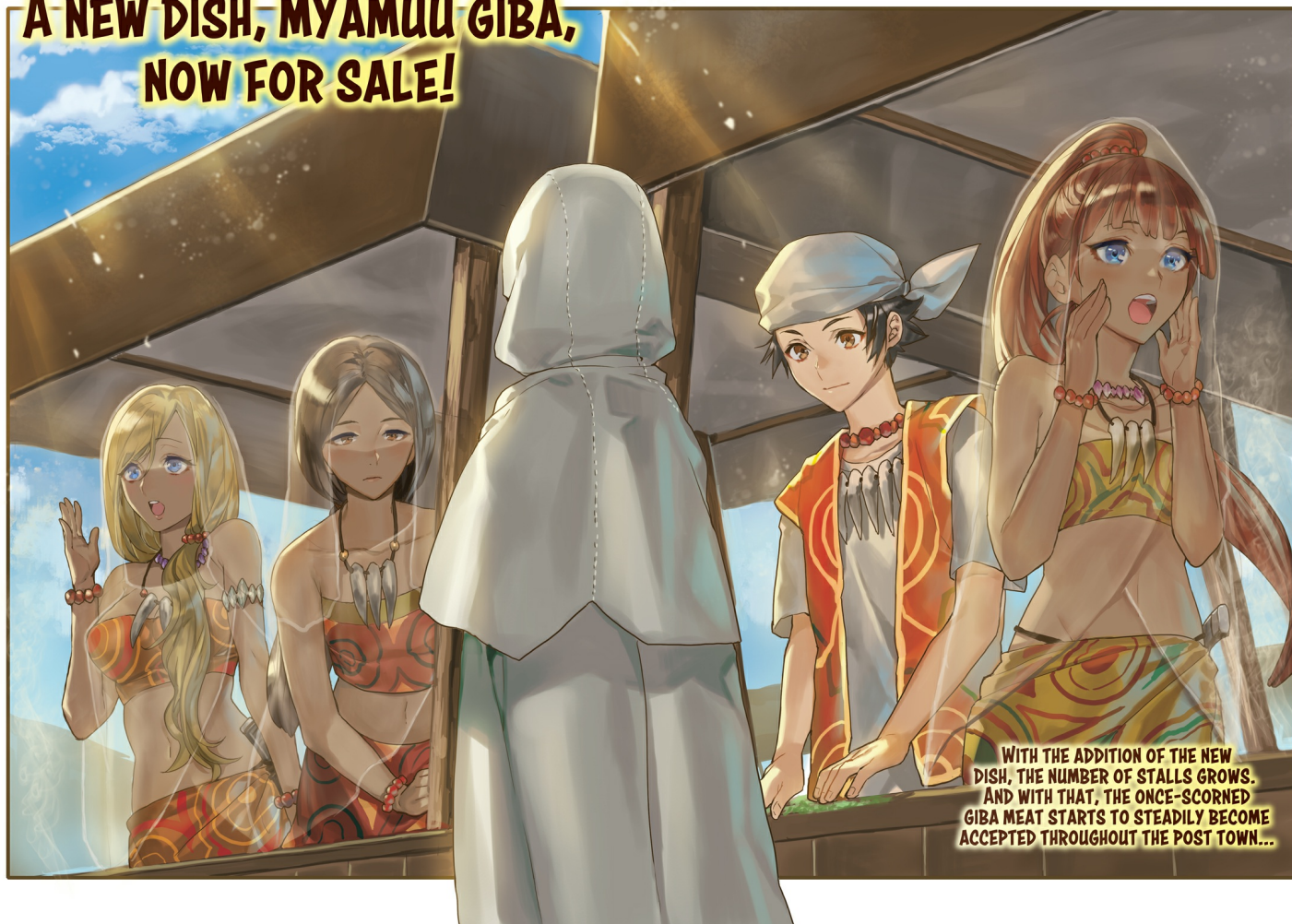
**A VOICE I HAD
NEVER HEARD
BEFORE SUDDENLY
CALLED OUT, BRINGING
ME BACK TO MY SENSES.**



COOKING WITH WILD GAME

**VOLUME
5**

**A NEW DISH, MYAMUU GIBA,
NOW FOR SALE!**



WITH THE ADDITION OF THE NEW
DISH, THE NUMBER OF STALLS GROWS.
AND WITH THAT, THE ONCE-SCORNE
GIBA MEAT STARTS TO STEADILY BECOME
ACCEPTED THROUGHOUT THE POST TOWN...



I WAS QUICKLY
SWEATING UP A
STORM, BUT EVEN SO,
I KEPT ON ADVANCING
UNDER THE LIGHT
OF THE MOON

I NEED YOU,
AI FA... I'M
ONLY ABLE TO
WORK MY
HARDEST
BECAUSE
YOU'RE THERE
FOR ME.

"YOU
REALLY
ARE A
COMPLETE
AND
UTTER
FOOL..."

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Chapter 1: The Fourth Day—Frivolous Gluttony

1

The fourth day of work had arrived.

I got to the post town at the usual time alongside Vina Ruu, borrowed the stall from the grumpy-as-always owner of The Kimyuus's Tail, Milano Mas, then finally we headed for the northern tip of the bazaar while getting the usual suspicious looks from passersby.

I could see a crowd was forming a couple dozen meters removed from our usual spot. I braced myself and approached, and the people from the west who had gathered mainly out of curiosity parted to make way.

Waiting on the other side were folks from the south with rather scary-looking faces, and expressionless people from the east staring back at them. There must have been around thirty of them in total, making for an even bigger crowd than yesterday.

On top of that, there were the guards standing between the two and glaring our way as we approached, looking like judges.

"Hey, did you properly prepare enough meals this time, like we discussed?"

"Yes. I have 40 of the first dish and 30 of the second, making it enough to feed 70 people in total."

Yesterday, I had prepared 40 meals for the shop, but we still sold out before the sun even hit its peak. And if that was all that happened, it wouldn't make sense for anyone to complain about it, but the folks from Sym and Jagar were pretty much fated enemies to begin with, so they ended up causing a commotion over my food.

If something like that happened again, the guards might force me to shut down the shop. And since I wanted to avoid that no matter what, I had prepared 40 giba burgers and 30 myamuu giba for today.

“Alright, first off we’ll start with the giba burgers. Vina Ruu, could you please get the fire ready?”

“Right!” Vina Ruu replied, sounding like she was in a good mood once again today.

It looked like she barely even noticed the hatred seething around the customers and the guards. And that was definitely reassuring to see.

“Oh, my, that’s a nice fruit wine smell... That’s the new dish, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. In addition to fruit wine it also uses a spice called myamuu, so I decided to call it myamuu giba,” I replied, pulling up the sealed bag filled with six kilos of giba meat and marinade.

I narrowly opened up the mouth of the bag, then poured just the marinade into a different bag.

I had determined it needed an hour for the marinade to soak in, so the time spent traveling from the Fa house to the post town was perfect for that.

“Once things quiet down a bit, how about you try the myamuu giba?”

“Right. Teeheehee, I’m looking forward to it...” Vina Ruu said with a seductive laugh while stirring the tarapa sauce in the pot. Her always drowsy-looking eyes peered into the pot, looking puzzled about something.

“Oh...? This one seems like it smells a bit different than it did yesterday, too...”

“Ah, I tried adding a bit of myamuu to the tarapa there, too. Today’s a test, so I just went with a tiny amount, but you still can tell, huh?”

“Yeah, it smells really good... I feel like I just got hungrier, somehow...”

Myamuu was a spice with a strong aroma and taste that resembled garlic. And so, it went without saying that it paired well with the pseudo-tomato, the tarapa.

It seemed like a bit of a stir was starting to spread among the folks from Jagar surrounding the stall. I was certain that was down to the massive impact of the myamuu and tarapa aroma on their appetites.

I tried not to pay it any heed, but even so, the number of folks standing around staring was growing steadily as I worked.

“There sure are a lot of people... It’s like all the folks from Sym and Jagar in town have gathered...”

“And I’m certainly grateful for it. But with this, the giba burgers we’re starting with will sell out in no time, huh?”

I was planning on shifting to two stalls and increasing the amount of food from tomorrow on. And so, I just prayed in my heart that we’d somehow safely make it through today.

“Does it look about ready? Well then, we’re open for business!”

Under the guard’s guidance, the folks from Jagar came forward first. They had shaggy, dark brown hair and beards, as well as firm, stout builds. They also had white skin with a tinge of red to it, and every last one had an intimidating face.

At the head of the group was the man in the prime of his life known as Aldas, who seemed to be the vice-leader of the construction group. He was pretty tall for the generally stout people of Sym, so you couldn’t mistake him for anyone else.

“...Hey, sorry for causing that commotion yesterday.”

“Ah, no, I messed up by not preparing ten more meals to start with, so please don’t worry about it.”

“Yeah, you got that right. With food that good, you’d never satisfy demand with just 40 plates, so that really was clumsy of you,” he said while looking discontent, but his eyes somehow still looked pretty sorry. “But still, I’m sure glad you didn’t end up getting driven out of the post town. We were the ones making a fuss, so why’d the guards have to go and blame you?”

“That’s... because we’re people of the forest’s edge, I suppose,” I replied while preparing a giba burger, causing Aldas to look even more displeased.

“The people of the forest’s edge cast aside the southern god, Jagar, so I can get why older folks from the south curse them as traitors, but I simply can’t understand your new comrades in the west looking down on you. If the people

of the forest's edge didn't hunt giba, this Genos region could never have turned out as prosperous as it has."

I was completely in agreement.

But I couldn't stand around having a discussion with a customer right now, so I handed over the completed giba burger.

A sour look had remained fixed on Aldas's stern face up until that moment, but suddenly he exploded with joy.

"Hey, why don't you work till night time? I'd love to have your cooking for dinner, too."

"Hmm, that'd be a bit tricky... It'd be nice if the inns wanted to start handling giba meat too, though," I said, gently extending my feeler, but Aldas just shook his head and looked disappointed.

"Giba meat is one thing, but the bottom line is, your skill's just that good. Ever since that day, Pops has been in a bad mood... Apparently, he doesn't like us all happily discussing how delicious your food is. I figure if you used karon or kimyuus meat, Pops would probably drop his work right away and come flying."

"I'm honored you'd say that. Um... Like I discussed yesterday, once morning passes, I should be selling a new dish, so could you tell Pops that I'd love to have him come again sometime to try it?"

"Hmm? Got it. I'll tell him."

As we discussed that, someone from behind impatiently called out, "Hey, are you still not done?"

And so after that, I just focused intently on preparing giba burgers.

Nobody insisted on trying a sample, so I flew through those first 20 giba burgers in no time, selling to the full set of Jagar customers and two or three from Sym.

"Sorry! Please hold on a bit longer while I get the next 20 prepared!"

Considering the size of the pot, 20 patties and sauce was the most I could cram in at once.

I diced up the two tarapa I had bought from Dora on the way here, and then threw them into the pot.

“Asuta, I should turn up the heat, right...?”

“Yeah, please do.”

As I replied, I picked up two fruit wine containers, then shook the lighter of the two into the pot. Inside was diced aria and myamuu that I had sauteed back at the house, and then about 1/4th of the contents was actual fruit wine. The other container was just full of fresh water, for when the temperature of the pot went too high.

The folks from Jagar had mostly dispersed while I was heating up the extra sauce, so the guards left too, looking exasperated.

The onlookers burning with curiosity also started leaving around then, just leaving the dark skinned, slender folks from the east.

“Teeheehee... It kind of reminds you of the Rutim banquet somehow, doesn't it?”

“Yeah, this hustle and bustle certainly is familiar.”

“I'm not skilled at manning the stove, and I never especially liked it, but... When I'm with you, Asuta, it's not a bother at all...”

I felt honored to hear that.

Plus, Vina Ruu wasn't putting on a coquettish look or anything. No, she just plain looked happy.

When she was focusing on work, it wasn't hard to deal with Vina Ruu in the least. It sure would be nice if that could lead to a nice peaceful relationship between us... But I still didn't think I could afford to let my guard down.

“Alright, I guess that'll do it.”

I added just a bit of water, then tweaked the flavor with pico leaves and salt.

Then, I pulled patties which I had only cooked on the surface out of the third bag.

That leather bag had cost 15 red coins, so it was a notable expense, but it had

a wide mouth making it convenient to use, and apparently it was meant for carrying fruit wine to start with, so it was made such that the smell of the food wouldn't transfer to it. In fact, coming across this convenient item was precisely what caused me to make up my mind to sell myamuu giba in the shop.

I had to make sure it sold, so that the bag wouldn't turn out to be a wasted purchase.

"Thank you so much for waiting! I'll be selling the next 20 meals now!"

As soon as I said that, the customers from Sym started approaching.

Folks from Sym seemed to generally like wearing leather cloaks with hoods, but it wasn't like there weren't people in lighter clothing, too. And those folks all had on cloth outfits with beautiful swirling designs like what the people of the forest's edge wore, accessories made with layered stones and metals, and thin short swords hanging from their hips.

I couldn't help but think that those people reminded me of the people of the forest's edge. It wasn't just the outfits, but also the way that they didn't really show much expression and were quiet with their movements, which was just like the men of the forest's edge.

However, most of the men of the forest's edge were ferocious, with intimidating builds. And their skin was more of a creamy chocolate color, too.

But I guess guys like Shin Ruu are a bit like the people of the east. He's quiet, plus he has those almond shaped sort of eyes...

As that thought ran through my head, I sold 12 giba burgers. In no time at all, we were down to just eight of them.

On top of that, a cloaked group of ten was just a bit removed, staring straight at the stall. Just as I started wondering if they might be The Silver Vase, one of them pulled back his hood and approached.

And sure enough, when he did so his long silver hair came into view.

It was the leader of The Silver Vase, Shumiral... something or other.

"Is the giba, still not, sold out?"

"It isn't. I just have eight of these dishes left, but as I mentioned yesterday, I'll

be selling another type of giba dish.”

“Eight...” Shumiral said, looking like he was pondering something.

Then he returned to his group, only for five of them to approach in turn. They just silently slapped down their coins, so I said, “Thanks,” and set about preparing five giba burgers.

“So, three left?” Shumiral asked, coming up to me again.

“Yes. What do you want to do?”

“...We’ll wait.”

“What?”

“We want, to eat the new dish. Five of us, had work, so they gave up. Me and the other four, will wait.”

“I see. But I was thinking I’d start selling the new dish first thing in the morning tomorrow, too.”

“We can’t wait, till tomorrow. So we will wait, today.”

As we had that exchange, someone even taller than Shumiral smoothly approached.

“Well then, I guess I’ll jump ahead of you and make a purchase. Two please, Asuta.”

It was Kamyua Yoshu.

I’d built up enough of a resistance by now that such sudden appearances no longer surprised me.

“Thanks for your continued business... Sorry that we ended up selling out yesterday.”

“Seriously! There was nothing I could do about it, so I bought a snack from another place yesterday, but I felt so dissatisfied that it was like I hadn’t eaten at all. I’m really interested in the new dish too, but I’ll save that for tomorrow.”

When I was returning the cart yesterday, I ran into Kamyua Yoshu at The Kimyuus’s Tail and explained the situation to him.

He made quite a look of surprise when I told him, but I assumed he'd probably watched the whole thing from the shadows.

"Right, here's your two. Thanks for waiting."

"Thanks! Well then, keep on giving it your all!"

After giving one last bow to Shumiral, Kamyua Yoshu then casually departed.

He didn't seem to be getting much involved with me while I was working, perhaps out of consideration and not wanting to interfere with my business.

"...That person, is he an acquaintance?"

"Huh? Ah, yes. I'm reluctant to say so, but he is."

"I see... His hair and eyes, are the color of the north. His skin color, matches the west. How odd."

Ah, so for people of this world, it was possible to guess at Kamyua Yoshu's mixed blood just from looking at him, huh?

Still, I shouldn't go leaking the oldtimer's personal information to an ordinary customer like this. And so, I just agreed with a "Yeah."

"...Also, his heart, is like the people of the east. It is hard, to read, his thoughts, and feelings," Shumiral said with a pensive look. "He smiles. And yet, I can't see, how he's feeling... How strange."

Once again, all I could respond with was "Yeah."

I couldn't read how either Shumiral or Kamyua Yoshu were feeling at all.

At any rate, I figured it would be dangerous to try to push the remaining one left on his numerous companions, so I was just going to set about preparing the next dish... when a lone man from Jagar came running up.

"Hey! Are you already sold out?!"

"No, I have exactly one left."

"Ah, thank goodness! I ended up oversleeping today, so I almost ended up missing out!"

I didn't especially recognize him, but he must have been one of the customers

who came yesterday, too. And so, I gave a friendly, “Thanks for your continued business!” and prepared the final giba burger.

When I saw off the customer with a big grin on his face, I had completely sold through the giba burgers.

Sure enough, it hadn’t even taken an hour. It was a truly shocking sales pace.

“Alright. Now let’s move the tarapa sauce into the leather bag... But, well, we probably need to let it cool down a bit first.”

“Yeah... There’s a lot left today, isn’t there?”

Vina Ruu shot me a joyful sidelong glance, but I thought with a “Hmm...”

“Well, it only took a little bit to all sell out, so the sauce couldn’t have heated up all that much. If we reuse it tomorrow, we could probably cut down the expenses a fair bit.”

“Huh...?” Vina Ruu questioned, looking like she was about to cry.

She just looked so sad that I sighed without even thinking.

“I’m just kidding. Heated tarapa would probably last for two days, but since there are meat juices mixed in, it would be safest to eat it tonight. Please, go ahead and take it home with you.”

“Asuta, you’re so mean...” Vina Ruu said, puffing her cheeks.

So she was the type to do that rather than just pouting, huh?

And then, Shumiral muttered, “So lovely...”

“Huh? Did you say something?”

“She’s lovely. And also, very beautiful.”

Even while he was saying such things, his facial expression didn’t budge in the least.

As for Vina Ruu, she gave a smile that was shockingly lacking in warmth and replied, “Thank you for saying so...” Perhaps she’d grown sick of hearing praise from the opposite sex by this point.

At any rate, after three minutes of letting the pot cool, we transferred the

tarapa sauce to the leather bag and I finally set about making the myamuu giba.

Well, from what I can tell, the pace of people passing won't be picking up for a while yet, so for now I'll just make enough samples for the folks present.

First up, I sauteed the aria I had sliced, then I eyeballed out about a kilo of the giba meat that had been steeped in the marinade and tossed it in. That alone was enough to cause the scent of myamuu, fruit wine, and cooking giba meat to explode forth.

It was a shame that there weren't many passersby around. After all, this dish had an even more stimulating smell than the giba burgers. Even Shumiral, with his face naturally still completely expressionless, couldn't help but mutter, "The myamuu, smells good."

Once it was done cooking, I moved it to the wooden plate, coated it in plenty of heated marinade, and then wrapped it up in a poitan together with the diced tino.

"Ah, Vina Ruu, could you move the brazier outside?"

"Got it."

If we didn't move the brazier out when few people were around like this, the inside of the pot would end up burning. That made it a bit more of a hassle than the giba burgers, but on the other hand that meant it used up less firewood, so I suppose that made them about equal.

As I thought to myself that a charcoal fire or something would probably be ideal, I put together five myamuu giba. With the remaining meat, I made up samples.

"Thanks for waiting. This dish costs two red coins each."

Sure enough, the group with Shumiral at their head just silently nodded and handed over their coins. Apparently they didn't feel the need to try a sample.

Then, they bit into their myamuu gibas while minding their manners, but... What did they think of the taste? The way that their expressions were so hard to read sure was inconvenient at times like this.

"...That was delicious. From tomorrow on, we will eat them, in order."

“Huh? In order?”

“Yes. It’s hard to say, which is tastier. And so, we will eat them, in order.”

At any rate, it seemed that they liked it.

I couldn’t help but think how reserved they were, giving a smile.

“Thank you. It makes me incredibly happy to hear that.”

“I am also happy, to have encountered, such delicious food.”

As he said that, Shumiral suddenly turned his gaze towards Vina Ruu.

“Asuta, may I ask you, one question?”

“Yeah. What is it?”

“Is she, your wife?”

I was so caught off guard that I momentarily couldn’t even respond, but in that moment Vina Ruu gave a wide grin and coiled about my arm.

“That’s a secret...”

“I see. Excuse me.”

Shumiral then let an ever so slight bit of emotion show via his mouth. The silver haired youth from Sym gave a gentle, relaxed, and ever so slightly pained... smile.

Then he put his hood back on, and left with his other four comrades.

“Thanks for your continued business!” I yelled out, then yanked my arm free of Vina Ruu. “Hey! Vina Ruu, don’t you think stuff like that is kind of a problem?”

“But... It’s nothing but a hassle, isn’t it? Having someone from the east like me... Or are you saying I should have turned on the sex appeal...?”

Vina Ruu was always giving that off and causing chaos to begin with. But well... Figuring it was probably best that she kept things nice and simple with the customers after all, I gave a bit of a sigh.

“Still, it sure is amazing... We only just opened, but we’ve already sold even more than yesterday, right?”

“That’s true. Well, I get the feeling it was because all the customers worried about us selling out swarmed us immediately, though.”

And once that was over, the number of people passing by suddenly petered out. We were dealing with some serious extremes here.

“At any rate, we have 25 myamuu giba left. As long as we really do sell out of them, I’d like to move to the plan that we discussed yesterday.”

“You mean increasing to running two stalls, right...? It seems the intention is to lend you one woman from the main house and one from a branch family to help out...”

“Ah, we’ll be getting help from a branch family, too?”

“Well, there’s still work to handle around the house, so we can’t exactly loan out three women from the main house all at once, now can we...?” Vina Ruu said, then gave a little sigh. “Geez... So today may be the last day it’s just the two of us working together, huh? It was a blissful four days...”

“I-I mean, it should be fine having other people around, right?”

“But, I mean... Doesn’t it seem like Reina will be chosen from the main house...?”

I’d already firmed up my resolve for that.

Carrying the pots would be too much for a little girl like Rimee Ruu or Granny Tito Min, while Sati Lea Ruu had Kota Ruu to take care of. Setting aside Mia Lea, as she was the one who led the women, that just left Reina and Lala Ruu.

And this time I asked for at least one of the women to have some skill at manning the stove, so it was practically like I had gone and specified Reina Ruu.

Vina Ruu was doing a great deal better than I had expected with focusing on the work. Ideally, it would be nice if I could form the same sort of peaceful relationship with Reina Ruu.

“Someone from the main house should be coming here to the post town soon, so when they do, perhaps they’ll tell us who was chosen to help out...?”

“Huh? But wasn’t tomorrow the day that the Ruu family was set to stock up again?”

“Yeah... But I asked them to take care of something else too, so they moved it up by one day to today.”

I was about to ask just what she was talking about, but before that, she said, “Oh, my... We were just talking about them, and there they are. They sure are here early...”

I followed Vina Ruu’s gaze, and spied an unexpected pair. No, well, one of them wasn’t really all that surprising, but still...

Either way, the second son and daughter of the main Ruu house were heading straight our way.



2

“Asuta, long time no see,” Reina Ruu called out.

The expression on her face was almost shockingly calm.

“Yeah, right back at you. I guess it’s been around ten days now, right?”

Ten days since we had that unpleasant parting of ways at the Rutim banquet. When she asked me to leave the Fa clan for the Ruu, but I wasn’t able to grant her wish.

And yet, she declared that she wouldn’t give up and then left, leaving me to worry over how to deal with her. Ultimately, I decided I needed to remain firm.

But now, Reina Ruu was standing before me with a calm, gentle smile on her face.

In fact, she was so relaxed right now that it was as if the previous childlike innocence she used to give off had been locked away.

“Vina, here’s what you asked for.”

“Ah, thanks. It was probably heavy, right...?”

“No, not at all,” Reina Ruu replied, lowering something on her back to the ground next to the stall.

It was a large bag meant for carrying vegetables. It seemed like there must have been something solid in there, as it settled down into a sort of angular shape.

“What’s that? It looks like firewood...”

“It is. I gathered it up over the last three days...”

I still didn’t get what was going on.

“We finished way ahead of schedule the last three days, right...? So Mia Lea said I should spend that extra time finding more work to do for you. And the only thing I could think of that I could do was gather firewood...”

“Oh, so that’s it?! Man, thanks for that. We’ll be using more firewood than

ever starting tomorrow, after all.”

“But you and I always have our hands full as it is, so I asked Mia Lea if it could be brought when someone comes to do shopping. And my mom replied with a smile, saying that was a cheap price to repay the leftover tarapa you’ve been giving us every day...”

Then, she shot me a bitter glance.

“I was thinking the whole time about how I’d surprise you, but then you went and said such a mean thing...”

“S-Sorry. That really was just a joke. And I’m really glad, thank you,” I hurriedly apologized, half covering up the sound of bags being roughly plopped down. That was from Darmu Ruu dropping the bags he had been shouldering.

He had been holding three bags of firewood. Three times as much as Reina Ruu. It was possible to get to the post town in less than an hour from the Ruu settlement, but it would definitely still be difficult for me or one of the women to carry that much.

“Thanks to you too, Darmu... But is it alright for you not to be resting...?” Vina Ruu asked.

Darmu Ruu didn’t reply.

I couldn’t see his expression, as he had what looked like grey bandages wrapped all around his head and face.

But as always, those blue eyes he inherited from his father were lit up like those of a wild wolf, which made it clearer to me than anything else that this really was Darmu Ruu.

“You see, Darmu got a head injury while protecting a hunter from a branch family... It was a very serious injury, enough that he had a hard time walking around on his own until three days ago...”

“You don’t need to tell him that,” Darmu Ruu muttered in a low voice.

I hadn’t even seen Darmu Ruu on the night of the banquet, so this reunion had taken even longer than my one with Reina Ruu.

On top of that, he hadn’t been doing any talking around me, so this may have

actually been my first time hearing his voice since that argument he had with Ai Fa, a month ago.

I had heard he got hurt, but that was already seven days ago. It was that serious of a wound...?

He had let his emotions get the better of him and run his mouth on that night a month ago, but he didn't show any signs of trying to make a move on Ai Fa since then, so I didn't see any reason for me to hold a grudge.

And so, I said, "Thank you very much," and earnestly bowed my head.

Of course, what I got back was a disapproving glare and some unfriendly words.

"I did this work to repay you for the tarapa you've been sending to the Ruu house. There's no reason for you to be thanking me."

"Geez, you sure are stubborn... Are you perhaps like dad in that way...?" Vina Ruu said with a giggle.

Darmu Ruu shot the same sort of glare her way, but that wasn't enough to quiet his daring older sister.

"Still, I'm glad to see you're feeling well enough to carry all that... You'll be able to head back out into the forest again soon, but don't push yourself, alright?"

"...I haven't fallen so low that I need someone like you worrying about me."

"Oh, my, what a horrible thing to say to your big sister... See, isn't he adorable?" Vina Ruu stealthily whispered to me.

I suppose it was the sort of adorableness that only relatives could see. In fact, if any of the folks from the Suun clan could give off that sort of pressure, I would feel at least 50% more in danger.

"...Asuta, I have a message from our mom and dad. Could you listen to it?" Reina Ruu quietly interjected. "If you need more help from tomorrow on, then they'll loan you Lala Ruu from the main house, and Sheera Ruu from one of the branch families."

"Ah, so it's Lala and Sheera Ruu?"

“Yes. I told them that I would absolutely like the opportunity to work with you, but that request wasn’t granted,” Reina Ruu said, and then she smiled.

Was she always the type of girl to make that sort of face under such circumstances?

What was it...? For some reason, I couldn’t read her feelings at all.

“This is your new dish, isn’t it?” Reina Ruu asked, her eyes falling on the plate of samples.

“Y-Yeah. If you’d like, you could try a sample. They’ve cooled down though, so I’ll heat it back up for you.”

“No. These are meant for the people of the post town to eat, aren’t they? If I ate one, then there would be less left to feed them. And I don’t want to do anything that would interfere with your work.”

Reina Ruu cast her eyes downward and smiled.

When she saw that, Vina Ruu gave a listless sigh.

“Hey, Asuta... It’s alright for me to have a taste test, right? If it’s alright, could I do that now...?”

“Huh? Ah, yeah. Of course I don’t mind.”

More or less sensing Vina Ruu’s intentions, I threw some fresh firewood into the now half-empty brazier and set it back in the stall.

Then, while the pot was heating up, Darmu Ruu called out “Hey,” to Vina Ruu. “No one from the Suun clan has shown up today, have they?”

“That’s right. In fact, it’s not just the Suun clan... We haven’t seen any people of the forest’s edge in general, right...?”

“That’s true. I mean, even if they were coming here for shopping they wouldn’t come all the way over here to the outskirts, so it’s possible none of them have even realized we’re here yet.”

“I see,” Darmu Ruu said with his gaze fixed on Vina Ruu, and then he gave a small nod. “What about that Kamyua Yoshu man, then?”

“He just bought some of Asuta’s cooking and left... Though with him, I

suppose it's still possible he's hiding in the shadows of the trees somewhere and watching..."

"...I see," Darmu Ruu replied, shooting an even fiercer glance at the grove behind our stall.

That guy really could be hiding out somewhere right now, eavesdropping on our conversation... It was a truly unpleasant thought. He'd expressed an affection for the people of the forest's edge, but we didn't exactly have a mutual understanding in the least, so it was always hard to tell whether he was really an ally or an enemy.

"Alright, I'll go ahead and whip it up."

I dropped some aria into the freshly heated pot, then the meat, and next I went ahead and prepared a single serving of myamuu giba.

As Vina Ruu accepted it, she said, "It really does look delicious..." with a joyous smile on her face, and took a bite. "Yeah, it's tasty... But it's a really sweet flavor. I feel like our dad may hate it..."

"That's true. I used plenty of fruit wine, after all."

"But still, it's incredibly delicious... I think I like it just as much as the giba burgers..."

Vina Ruu took one more bite, and then she held it out towards Reina Ruu.

"Reina... This is my portion, so there's no need to hold back. Won't you at least try a bite...?"

"Huh, but...?"

"If you won't have any, though, then I'll eat all of it..."

As she said that, Vina Ruu took another bite.

A childish, anxious look flashed across Reina Ruu's face. Yes, now she looked like the girl that I knew from before.

"Well then, just one bite..." she said, timidly reaching out.

Then, her little mouth bit down on the myamuu giba... and her face erupted in a smile that made it look like she simply couldn't contain her joy.

“It’s... delicious. It’s a really powerful taste, isn’t it...?”

“Yeah. I thought that this strong of a spice might better meet the tastes of the townsfolk.”

“You really are amazing, Asuta... Ah, I wish I could help out too...” she said while looking down at the ground. She really did seem like her usual earnest self again.

“...It’s not as if Asuta will actually close up shop after these ten days, and it’s not like it has to always be the same women helping him, right...? It’s perfectly possible that your turn will come, Reina.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Reina Ruu replied with a bashful smile.

Then, she somewhat timidly glanced my way.

“If that time comes... I look forward to working with you, Asuta.”

“Ah, right, same here.”

When she heard my reply, she broke out in a joyous smile, so overly sweet that it felt like it was giving me a toothache.

“If that finishes our business here, then we’re leaving,” Darmu Ruu called out, sounding irritated.

“Oh, my, don’t you want to try some too, Darmu...?”

“As if I’d need something like that...” Darmu Ruu muttered, then he glared my way once again with his wolf-like gaze. “Hey... What’s the deal with that look in your eyes? Are you pitying me for being clumsy enough to get injured so badly I can’t go out into the forest?”

“Huh? That wasn’t my intention at all! I’ve even been nearly killed by giba twice, myself. I don’t think getting injured while hunting giba makes you clumsy at all.”

As I scratched my head, I thought to myself how I really just didn’t seem to get along with him. It was then that Vina Ruu slipped out of the stall and wriggled herself around Darmu Ruu’s robust right arm.

“That’s no good. If you get all hotheaded like that, you might open up your

wounds again, right...? If you want to be healthy again soon, then you've got to take care."

"Oh, shut it. And don't act all clingy like that," Darmu Ruu replied, violently shaking off his sister.

Then he just started walking south, so Reina Ruu hurriedly bowed her head.

"My apologies for interrupting your work. And please take good care of Vina... You should make sure you take care too, Asuta."

"Right, thanks. Give my regards to Donda and Mia Lea Ruu."

After shooting one last joyful smile our way, Reina Ruu hurried after her brother. Vina Ruu gave a little sigh, still holding the partially eaten myamuu giba in her hands.

"Did I do something I shouldn't have...? But still, it was just too painful, watching Reina crush her own feelings like that..."

"Huh? W-What do you mean?"

"Reina has carried a look like she's deep in thought ever since the night of the Rutim banquet... I don't want to see Reina suffer, but I also want to see you and her be joined together even less..."

I just stood there in silence.

"Hey... Why don't you and Ai Fa just get together already?"

What sort of face must I have been making when I heard that? As for Vina Ruu, she looked completely and utterly serious.

"...If I did that, would it somehow settle everything smoothly?"

"Yeah... When it happened, my heart would be probably be shattered into itty bitty pieces, to the point where I'd even be prepared to go and do something crazy..."

"What?"

"And so I'd just have to seduce you, so the two of us can leave the forest's edge together. After all, Ai Fa would never forgive us, so we couldn't remain at there... And I'm sure Reina wouldn't care what happened to us at that point,

once she hears how far we've fallen..."

"Hey! That doesn't sound like it's settling things smoothly at all!"

"That's about the only future I can imagine anymore in which the two of us are tied together..." Vina Ruu muttered in a pathetic tone, hanging her head, but what she was saying was completely nuts. I gave a sigh, putting all my strength behind it.

"Just like I said before, I've got no intentions of marrying anybody. And there's no way I'd play along with such a disturbing plan for the future, anyway."

"Then what would you do if Ai Fa asked you to marry her...? Do you really think you could turn her down...?"

I wasn't able to immediately answer back that I could.

The idea of a future in which Ai Fa asked me to marry her just seemed way too unreal.

But if that were to actually happen, then what...?

I had thought that I didn't want to take anyone as a spouse when I had no idea when I might disappear, but at the same time, I also wanted to stay by Ai Fa's side for the rest of my life.

If Ai Fa asked me to marry her... Just what would I do?

As she started toying with the tips of her chestnut-color hair, Vina Ruu shot me a sidelong glance while I stood there at a loss for words.

"Or perhaps Ai Fa could make up her mind to marry another man... Just let me say, I'm pretty sure Darmu still has strong feelings about wanting to make Ai Fa his bride... After all, he's turned down countless requests over these past two years, too."

"A-Ai Fa has no intention of becoming a bride or marrying anyone into her house either, so that future will never come."

"Even if that's true now, people's feelings change, you know... After all, Ai Fa once cut off all ties to everyone, but then she went and welcomed you into her clan, didn't she? Even Ai Fa herself doesn't know how she'll feel in a year or

two...”

“That... may be so, but still...”

“So even if Ai Fa offered to marry you, you would turn her down...? And if she then decided to turn around and marry Darmu instead, could you give them your blessing...?”

This time around, I really was stunned to silence.

At least looking at her now, I just couldn’t imagine Ai Fa ever choosing to not be a hunter any longer.

But even some sudden accident could lead to a big change in how someone felt.

And plus, even if her feelings didn’t change, it was possible she could suffer a big injury and never be able to work as a hunter again, like what happened to Shin Ruu’s father, Ryada Ruu.

If that time came... Just what would I do?

“Hey. Are you still not closed up for today?” a voice I had never heard before suddenly called out, bringing me back to my senses. “The folks from Sym and Jagar all left, right? Even if you stick around in the post town, nobody else will buy giba meat, you know.”

Not only was his voice unfamiliar, so was his face.

It was a man... Or I guess I should say a youth. He may have been around the same age as I was. And he seemed to be awful punkish, too.

His skin was ivory-white, his dark brown hair was in a plain style, and his eyes were a lighter brown. He had on a vest that opened wide at the chest, and had a knife dangling from his hip. He also had friends who looked to be about the same age gathered behind him. Of that group of five, only one of them was a girl.

“...Welcome,” I said with a smile.

They were clearly ridiculing me, but they were also customers from the west, like I’d wanted from the very start.

The sight of Ai Fa was still firmly burned into my mind, but now wasn't the time to be worrying about that.

"Giba meat is delicious, you see. If you'd like, you could sample it to see how it tastes," I said, pointing out the plate of samples. With that, the youth looked at me with a chuckle that made it clear he thought I was nuts.

"There's no way anyone from the west would eat that. And you're from somewhere else, aren't you? How'd you get yourself roped into selling giba meat by a giba eater woman? And you've already earned plenty of coins today, haven't you? So scurry on back to the forest's edge."

It was like what Pops from Jagar had said two days ago, but there was far more animosity behind this youth's words.

And I was certain it must be contempt and fear at the root of all that. As he spat out those aggressive words, his gaze started wandering a bit. He was laughing at me, but he didn't especially sound like he was enjoying himself. I was starting to get the feeling that this was the bad kids around town challenging each other to prove their bravery by picking a fight with people from the forest's edge.

And yet, these were exactly the sort of customers I had been waiting for. My true test here was to see if I could get them to keep an open mind and try giba meat.

"It's true that I wasn't born at the forest's edge. However, I still believe that giba meat is incredibly delicious even so. That's precisely why I opened this shop, to show the people of the post town just how tasty it can be," I cheerfully responded.

The youth, though, got a little twitch in his cheek and said, "Hmph! The only ones who'd find that crap delicious are poor people who come here from the south and east for work! We don't want your shop here, so hurry up and get lost!"

"You think so? It's true that I still haven't had many customers from the west try my food, but fortunately, those that did gave it their praise. Tastes of course vary from person to person, but still, would those folks there care to give it a try, too?"

As I said that, I signaled to Vina Ruu with my eyes. Or at least I was about to, but before I could get to it, I saw that she was already setting the brazier into the stall.

“...Sounds interesting. Go ahead and eat it,” the only girl said, sounding like she was enjoying herself as she gave the youth a rough nudge on the back.

This girl had a seriously sensual look about her, though not quite as much as Vina Ruu, and she looked to be about my age, too. The only part of her torso covered was her chest, but she also had on a skirt that reached from her hips down to her heels, making for an appearance that reminded me of Vina Ruu’s post town look. But she didn’t have on a veil or shawl, meaning she was showing even more skin, the colors of her outfit were quite flashy, and there were jangling accessories dangling from her neck and arms.

All of the group, that sensual girl included, had ivory-white skin. Some of them seemed to get plenty of sun though, making their skin look more yellowish-brown. In the back of my mind, I pondered that even the people of the west were part of the same humanity, and must have shared the same roots as everyone else.

“Don’t be crazy. Why should I have to eat giba meat of all things?”

“What’s the problem? If it’s good, I’ll eat it too.”

“Then you go ahead and eat it first! And if it’s good, then *I’ll* give it a try.”

“Hmph, how pathetic. No matter what you say, you’re ultimately just scared of giba, aren’t you?” the girl questioned with a smile meant to provoke the boy, then she brushed her hand through her long, dark brown hair.

Sure enough, this seemed to be a test of courage and some teasing. But even so, it was just what I wanted.

As they were bickering like puppies the pot had heated up, so I went ahead and grabbed a pinch of giba meat out of the leather bag.

When I tossed that into the pot, it gave a delightful sizzling sound, and a sweet aroma started spreading through the air.

Instantly, the two of them stopped talking.

And the group hanging back all approached the stall, looking like they were getting pulled along by an invisible string.

Once the surface of the meat was cooked, I added a spoonful of marinade, which caused even more fragrant white smoke to fill the air.

“...Myamuu, huh? Of course it would smell good when you’re using that stuff,” the initial youth scoffed, but nobody chimed in to agree with him.

Just when it seemed like it was about done I added the portion from the plate back to the pot, got everything nice and stirred, then moved it all back to the plate.

Vina Ruu swiftly placed the brazier outside, while I laid out my grigee toothpicks atop the plate.

“Now then, would you care to give it a try? Just getting a taste would be fine. Even if it isn’t to your tastes, it would make a fine topic of conversation, wouldn’t it?”

The five youths, including the one girl... All of their faces made it clear that they were at a loss.

It was obvious that they were feeling greatly conflicted, and didn’t know how to proceed.

They didn’t want to eat giba meat and found the idea unpleasant, but they didn’t want their pride to be hurt by causing the others to think they were afraid of giba, and then there was their animosity towards the people of the forest’s edge, and the delicious smell in front of them now spurring on their curiosity... Their hearts were being tugged in all sorts of directions by all sorts of matters.

“Y’know... It looks really tasty, doesn’t it...?”

“B-But it’s still giba meat, isn’t it, dummy?”

“That’s right! Proper people would never be caught dead eating giba meat!”

“And my granny said if you eat this stuff, you’ll grow horns and tusks like a giba...”

“It’s totally obvious using myamuu will make something smell good.”

“Yeah... But it really does look tasty, too...”

“That’s for sure! It looks delicious!”

Hmm?

I suddenly noticed a little dark brown head amidst the crowd of youths.

It was Dora the vegetable seller’s beloved daughter, Tara.

“Asuta! This is your new dish, right?! The myamuu smells really good!”

“Ah, if you want, you can go ahead and try a sample.”

I added another toothpick, which Tara grabbed and excitedly proclaimed,
“Yay!”

Then, with the bewildered youths all staring at her, she joyfully exclaimed,
“It’s delicious! It’s not soft like the giba burgers! But it’s still really tasty! Four please!”

“Thanks! But do your dad and the rest not need to try it for themselves first?”

“Nope! They said if I tried it and it was yummy, I should buy them before they sell out!”

I was really grateful to hear that.

It was all thanks to Dora that the guys from the pot and cloth shops had any interest in giba cooking in the first place.

And I was sure it was thanks to Vina and Ludo Ruu that Dora ever became so open-minded to start with.

As that thought ran through my head, I smiled back at Tara.

“Alright! Could you hold on just a moment? I’ll have them ready shortly.”

“Right!”

The brazier that had just been set outside was placed back in the cart, and I sauteed up enough aria and meat for four dishes.

I even thought I heard the sound of one of the youths gulp down their saliva.

Now that I had a moment to think about it, my first Sym customer had seen Tara ordering a giba burger and gotten interested in the shop as a result, too. I

keenly felt just how much good fortune was coming my shop's way thanks to my association with her.

"Thanks for waiting! That'll be eight red coins."

"Yup! Thanks!"

Tara then took off running, carefully cradling the four myamuu giba in her arms.

As I scooped the impurities out of the pot with my wooden spatula, I smiled at the hesitant youths.

"Now then, would you like to try it? They're samples, so it's completely free."

"Alright... I'll eat it," the single girl said, reaching out towards the plate.

"Y-You idiot, cut it out! What'll you do if you end up growing horns?!"

"There's no way that'll happen. You seriously believe that dumb superstition?"

As she said that, the girl was making a face like she was deep in thought about something.

"T-That little kid ate it like it was nothing, so we look like idiots being so scared about it. If you all don't want to be called cowards, then you should give it a try, too."

"I-It's not like I'm scared or anything!"

As I saw that youth raising a fuss out of the corner of my eye, the girl grabbed a toothpick.

Then, while shooting a fierce glare at me and Vina Ruu, she got a do-or-die look on her face and tossed the meat into her mouth.

She gave it two or three chews, then her eyes opened wide and she went, "Whoa..."

"H-Hey, are you alright?" one of the youths asked, putting his hand on her shoulder, only for the girl to cruelly swat it aside.

Finally, she muttered, "It's... *really* good..."

I stealthily breathed a sigh of relief as the youths started raising a fuss.

“What did you just say? It’s giba meat, you know. Is something wrong with your head?”

“Shut up! If you think I’m lying, then try it yourself! If you still think it’s gross, then I’ll strip naked here and now!”

Ah, no, that seems like it’d get the guards summoned, so please don’t.

Still, this sure was some response.

At last, a citizen of the west who I’d never met before had eaten giba meat and called it delicious. On my fourth day of work, I had finally reached this point.

“Damn it, fine! Make sure you don’t forget that promise, alright?” the boy said in an exasperated tone, then he finally grabbed a toothpick.

While making a face that half looked like he was about to cry, the youth picked out the smallest looking piece of meat and slowly carried it up to his mouth.

“Whoa...” he muttered, his eyes going wide just like the girl’s had.

“Well? Isn’t it delicious?” the girl asked, puffing out her chest with pride at her victory.

Then, the other four started reaching out one by one.

Fortunately, not a one of them called it gross. Instead, all of them just opened their eyes wide in surprise.

Did the folks from the west have a better affinity for giba meat than the ones from the south, or was myamuu giba more generally appealing than giba burgers...? The answer to those questions remained a mystery, but this was definitely a step forward compared to the second day, where half the people were dissatisfied.

“...Hey. It was two red coins, right?” the girl asked with a harsh look in her eyes, to which I gave a friendly, “That’s right.”

“H-Hey, Yumi, you aren’t actually planning on buying one, are you?”

“What’s the matter? There’s no reason not to buy such delicious food, is there? Do you really want to buy something from a different shop after eating that?” the girl called Yumi firmly stated, then she slapped her coins down on the counter.

“What about you all? Are you not buying any? I’ll warn you now, I’m not sharing even a single bite with you guys.”

The youths looked at each other with bewilderment on their faces.

As she haughtily shrugged her shoulders, the girl glared my way again.

“Now hurry up and make it. Thanks to you, now I feel like I’m starving.”

“Right! Just one moment, please!”

We really were having to constantly pull the brazier out and then put it back in. Still, I greatly welcomed being busy like that.

There was still time till the sun hit its peak, and besides, even if none of them had bought anything this was still precisely the development I had been waiting for.

“Vina Ruu, please handle the brazier, alright?” I said with a smile, turning to face her.

However, Vina Ruu wasn’t moving.

Her seductive, slightly droopy eyes were narrowed and looking even sleepier than usual.

“Um, Vina Ruu...?”

Was she really getting struck by drowsiness at a time like this?

...No, underneath those sleepy-looking narrowed eyelids, Vina Ruu’s pale eyes were filled with a sharper light than I’d ever seen from her.

So even Vina Ruu’s eyes could get like that?

Still, just why did she need to make a glare like that? And besides, where she was looking made no sense.

She wasn’t looking at me by her side, the customers in front of us, or even the bustling south... No, Vina Ruu was staring north.

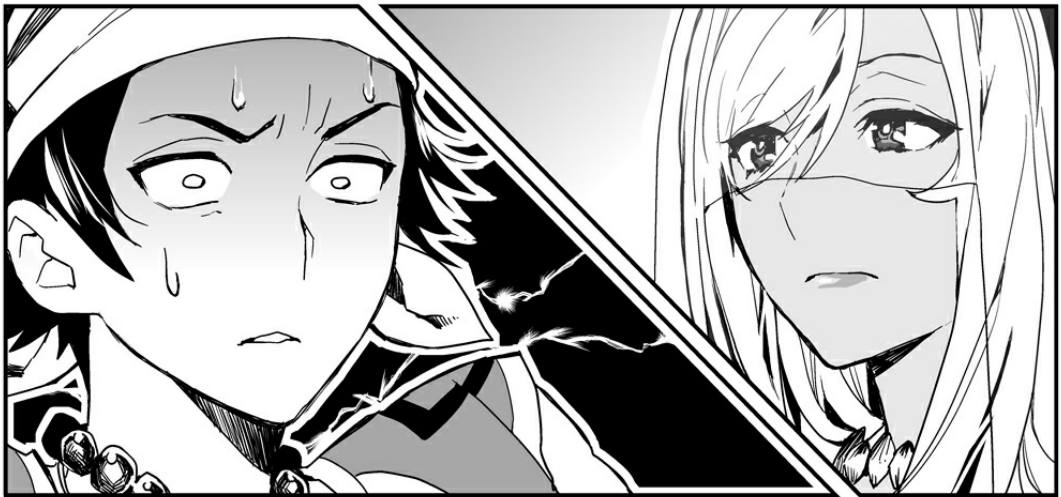
I slowly followed her gaze, and the customers did the same.

Then, we were all left shocked or trembling with fear.

That was just the natural reaction to what we were looking at.

It was a massive inflated body like a blimp made of flesh, around two meters tall. That bundle of meat that made you question if you were really looking at a human being was stomping along the stone path, heading straight towards us.

It was the youngest son of the main Suun house, Mida Suun.



3

One of the youths let out a helpless “Gah!” and slumped to the ground.

The other youths were all pulling back, their faces completely pale.

Meanwhile, Mida Suun, third son of the main Suun house, was coming up towards my stall so quickly that it looked like he was going to kick them out of the way, then he grabbed hold of it. It, not me. As in, my stall.

He had a hand around each of the pillars that supported the roof, and was panting heavily.

Mida Suun asked in a shrill voice, “What are you doing...? It smells really good. Hey, what are you doing...?”

His voice was high-pitched and had a lisp to it, making it sound like the voice of a small child.

The youth slumped on the ground let out a pathetic shriek of “Eep!” That was just how creepy and repulsive Mida Suun looked.

His face, body, arms, and legs all swelled out like fleshy balloons. In a manner of speaking, that was what they were, but combined with his ridiculous height, he looked like a real monster. His upper arm alone must have been as thick as Vina Ruu’s waist. And the legs supporting that massive frame were so thick and short that they just plain felt unreal. His torso was pretty much a perfect sphere, so it wasn’t even clear to me where his chest ended and his stomach began.

Technically, he was wearing a familiar outfit from the forest’s edge, but his must have required as much material as the one-piece outfits of two or three married women. He also wore a giba cloak, but it was so short in comparison to him that it looked downright tiny.

Plus, I didn’t see any of the giba tusks and horns that were a hunter’s pride and joy around his neck, but he had a massive club dangling from his hip.

No matter how I looked at him, his appearance was simply outrageous.

Ultimately, though, what made him look so utterly inhuman was that face of his. It was swollen to an unnatural degree, and all of his facial features were clustered around the center. And he was quite strikingly balding, with only a bit of disheveled dark hair clinging around his ears.

His expression was incredibly childish too. Actually, more babyish than childish... No, I guess it actually reminded me more of some sort of animal.

His nose, eyes, and mouth were all small. And his eyes were almost completely blocked by his plump eyelids, plus his nose hardly protruded out at all, just looking like two dark little holes. His lips were thick, but they weren't especially large. Overall, his face was easily bigger than the average man's, but it was like it had been put together using a nose and mouth that were a size too small, causing the proportions to look totally out of whack.

That blob of meat was holding onto the pillars of the stall and breathing heavily, a fire shining in his tiny eyes. Seeing his grotesque appearance in the light of day only stirred up the shock and fear I was feeling even stronger.

"Hey... I'm hungry now... And that smells really good, right...?"

The stall's pillars had started to creak.

Hearing that ominous sound was what finally brought me back to my senses.

"W-What are you doing?! Are you trying to break the stall?!"

"But... I'm hungry..." Mida Suun muttered, looking down at me with a look of displeasure.

I felt like an orangutan squaring off against a lowland gorilla or something.

I had yelled loudly at him by reflex, but now I brought my hands to my chest and got my breathing back under control.

I had to stay calm... Completely calm while I was dealing with him.

"You were asking what I was doing, right? As you can see, I'm here selling food... But as I said before, could you please remove your hands? At this rate, the stall will end up breaking."

If a member of the Suun clan appeared, how should I deal with them? That was naturally something I had taken under serious consideration with Gazraan

Rutim and Donda Ruu.

At any rate, I would abide by the laws of the town. And if he moved to break them, I would call for the guards.

Even if they were in the wrong, I couldn't go breaking any laws of the city or the forest's edge, as that would just lend legitimacy to the Suun clan's tyrannical acts. That was my basic policy here.

"Do you understand what I'm saying? If you want my cooking, then you'll have to pay coins... And this stall was borrowed from someone in town, so if you break it, you'll have to pay the money to have it repaired. So please, remove your hands," I stated, trying to make it as easy to understand as possible.

With an animalistic look that made it impossible to read him, Mida Suun stared down at me.

His brothers are just plain tyrants... But I think he's probably a different type...

The natural question then was what type he might be, but that was hard to explain. I guess I'd say rather than being some cruel fiend, he was likely the type of person who couldn't tell right from wrong.

And so, as long as I didn't slip up with what I said, he wouldn't suddenly get violent... Or at least, that's what I'd like to believe.

"But Tei Suun has the coins..." Mida Suun muttered in disappointment, but even so, he removed his giant caterpillar-like fingers from the stand.

As I wiped the cold sweat from my forehead, I replied, "Really? And where's that Tei Suun person now? Did you come to town together?"

"Yeah..."

"Then where did he go?"

"I don't know... We were together till just a bit ago..."

Man, it really was a lot like talking with an unreasonable toddler.

"...There was a nice smell, so I hurried up and ran here... It's a really nice smell, isn't it...?"

Now that I thought about it, back at the banquet Mida Suun had ignored what was happening around him and just reacted to the smell of the cooking.

I was wondering whether I should offer him a sample, and was reaching out towards the plate... and then someone new appeared.

“...What happened, Mida Suun?” He was an older man from the forest’s edge, looking to be somewhere in his fifties. He had appeared from behind the bundle of flesh while making no sign of his presence whatsoever, and was clad in the attire of a hunter.

Immediately, Mida Suun let out a big gasp. “Tei Suun! I’m really, really hungry...”

“I see,” the man replied, then he looked at me and Vina Ruu.

At a glance, he looked like a perfectly ordinary person of the forest’s edge. His grey hair was combed back, and he had a similarly colored beard and moustache. Overall, he was an older gentleman, but he had a nice clean-cut look.

He wasn’t all that tall, but he had a fittingly burly physique for a man of the forest’s edge. And there was nothing out of the ordinary about his hunter’s outfit, with his long giba pelt cloak, clothing with swirling patterns, shining horns and tusks dangling in front of his chest, and set of steel blades large and small.

But, what was it...? Everything about his appearance was perfectly in order, but something felt seriously out of place.

There was no strength at all shining in his dark eyes.

His expression was completely lifeless, like some sort of clay doll.

Though he looked able-bodied, I couldn’t sense any vitality or vigor about him.

It really may have been the first time I had ever seen a person of the forest’s edge so lacking in spirit.

“...How many coins does this food cost?” Tei Suun asked in a low voice.

“Two red coins... Do you want to make a purchase?”

“Yes.”

“Y-You can try the meat from this plate first to confirm the taste if you’d like.”

“No. That won’t be necessary.”

It was an extremely ordinary response. In fact, it was so ordinary that it somehow circled around to feeling a bit creepy.

Wasn’t there something he should be asking about before the price?

Such as why a woman of the forest’s edge like Vina Ruu and some random person who wore their attire like me would be running a shop in the post town, for example. Did he have no doubts or objections to that at all?

...Apparently, he didn’t.

Tei Suun just looked up at the bundle of meat by his side without so much as a hint of emotion.

“How many do you wish to buy, Mida Suun?”

“I want to eat lots and lots...”

“The clan head gave you one white coin. If you use that all now, you won’t be able to buy anything else later.”

“But I want to eat lots and lots...”

“I see,” Tei Suun replied, then turned back my way and placed down the white coin.

“Well then, five please.”

“Very well... But this customer here placed her order first, so please hold on just a moment.”

The customer in question, the girl from the west known as Yumi, still had a completely pale face, and she started to tremble. The rest of the youths were all in much the same state, too.

As I stifled a sigh, I added some firewood to the brazier and set it back in the stall.

Vina Ruu just kept on glaring at the pair from the Suun clan the entire time,

the look in her eyes unchanging.

What the heck is going on...? This Tei Suun oldtimer is every bit as baffling as Mida Suun.

With the way he was deferring to Mida Suun, he must have been from a branch family.

But at least in the Ruu clan, I couldn't imagine an elder man submitting to someone younger like that. Of course, the men of the branch families paid Jiza, Darmu, and Ludo Ruu an appropriate amount of respect, but it ultimately seemed like they treated each other as equals.

Did the Ruu or the Suun represent the proper way for the people of the forest's edge to be? I wasn't qualified to decide such things, but at the very least, I could firmly say that I found Tei Suun undeniably creepy.

"Ooh... It smells tasty, really tasty, Tei Suun..."

Excited by the aroma of the meat cooking, Mida Suun placed his hands on Tei Suun's shoulders and started shaking away. And as he was being vigorously jerked around, Tei Suun just quietly replied, "I see."

It was even harder to read his emotions than it was with folks from the east.

Actually... did he even have any emotions to begin with?

Was Kamyua just playing at merely acting as a spectator after all?

I certainly hoped that was the case.

If any more unfathomable characters showed up, I felt like my ability to handle them would steadily start crumbling away.

"Here, thanks for waiting."

I handed the finished myamuu giba over to Yumi.

Yumi's gaze remained fixed on Mida Suun, even as she half unconsciously grabbed the completed dish.

When I finished the next one I handed it over to Tei Suun, who in turn handed it to Mida Suun.

"Ooh..." Mida Suun exclaimed, his tiny eyes twinkling as his mouth opened

wide.

His throat was buried in his fleshy chest, though, so his jaw didn't look like it could lower all that much. And so, Mida Suun had to lean his head back in order to open his mouth nice and wide.

Just as I shrugged my shoulders, thinking that his mouth being so wide open made it look like his jaw may dislocate as his fatty cheeks rippled, he tossed the myamuu giba on in.

He took it all in one bite, and then licked his lips.

It was like something out of a nightmare.

Afterwards four more dishes made it to Mida Suun by way of Tei Suun, and in no time at all, five myamuu giba had disappeared from this world.

"It's delicious... Really delicious..."

"Thank you," I replied, forcing a smile.

As long as they paid, a customer was a customer. Even if I was dealing with a member of our hated enemies, the Suun clan, I had to treat them all equally.

"Tei Suun... I want to eat more..."

"But we already used all of the money."

"But... I want to eat lots and lots more..."

"You only receive one white coin from the clan head per month. You'll just need to wait till the next month."

An allowance that came once a month, huh?!

I honestly felt really relieved, though I felt bad for thinking so.

Even if he didn't actually have any ill intent, Mida Suun visiting my shop every day would definitely have an effect on the amount of customers I saw. Poor Yumi, for example, had gone and bought one, but she had been left standing there looking like she didn't even know what she was holding the whole time.

"I want to eat lots and lots more..."

"In that case, let's come back again next month," Tei Suun replied without so

much as a hint of emotion to his voice, then he finally nodded our way. “Well then, pardon us.”

“R-Right. Thank you for your purchase.”

Then they left, with Tei Suun looking like he was practically pushing Mida Suun along to the north.

Thinking about it, I’d heard that the Suun settlement was pretty far north, so perhaps they had a different route to get here from that way.

That was all well and good, but... Did they really come all the way to the post town just for Mida Suun’s snack?

On the one hand, I was relieved that they didn’t cause a huge disturbance, but on the other, I felt not just disappointed but also incredibly foolish, and ultimately just down in the dumps.

Seriously, what’s their deal...?

Not only did they not ask how the giba meat was made so delicious, they didn’t even ask what sort of meat it was in the first place.

I couldn’t tell if they were even aware that I was staying at the Fa house.

Perhaps they didn’t even know Vina Ruu was a member of the Ruu clan.

I didn’t know anything about them at all.

I was about to unleash my pent up sighs, but Vina Ruu beat me to it with a pronounced, “Haaaaah...”

Then she slumped to the ground and grabbed the fabric around my waist with her trembling fingers.

“Give me a break... Why out of all of them did *he* have to show up? Ugh... I feel like I’m going to vomit...”

“W-What’s the matter? Hold it together, Vina Ruu!”

“I can’t... At all... I just can’t stand him... That bloated, flabby body alone is enough to truly gross me out...”

“Is that so? You were making a brave face like one of the men, though...”

“Well, I didn’t want to look pathetic in front of the Suun clan of all people, you know? Ugh, so gross...”

“...That sure is impressive. I guess I should’ve expected that much from a woman of the Ruu clan, though,” I said with a sigh, feeling that from the depths of my heart.

Then, Yumi chimed in, “W-What was that monster just now...?” in a dumbfounded voice.

“You mean the customer from the forest’s edge, right? My apologies for all the commotion,” I called out, and Yumi’s shoulders suddenly jumped.

After that, Yumi’s eyes made it look like she had at last regained her senses, and then she stared at my face.

“You... You’re so skinny, but you’ve got some real guts, don’t you? These guys were shaking in their shoes and couldn’t do a thing.”

“W-We were not shaking! Besides, you looked like you were about to cry, didn’t you?!” the youth who had collapsed to the ground quipped back, rising to his feet with a beet red face.

It was around then that the other stupefied members of the group seemed to come back to their senses.

“I’ve met him once before. It’s a real shock the first time you see him, isn’t it?” I commented, forcing a smile to try and smooth things over. “Now then, please eat up. If it cools off too much, it won’t taste as good.”

“Ah, right...” she replied, biting into the myamuu giba while still staring straight at me.

Once again, her eyes opened wide in shock.

“Whoa, it’s so good... Hey, is this seriously giba meat? It’s even tastier than karon.”

“Yes. It’s one hundred percent authentic giba meat. I’m glad to hear you’re enjoying it.”

“Yeah... It’s super tasty,” Yumi replied, now shooting me upturned eyes. “Um... I’m sorry about before. I just kept talking shit about your shop...”

“Huh? Ah, think nothing of it. I’m well aware of how people think of giba here in Genos. And yet you all gave it a try today, which makes me very happy,” I replied, flashing yet another smile.

And then, after biting into her myamuu giba again, Yumi smiled back at me like it was only natural.

She may have looked like a mean girl normally, but she looked nice and innocent when she was smiling.

“What the heck’s wrong with you?! Don’t go making eyes at a man from the forest’s edge! If you do that, you’ll get dragged away to the forest, you know?!” the youth who had just been on the ground yelled out in a huff, only for Yumi to turn and shoot him a displeased glare.

“What are you, stupid? Why would you even think that?! All I did was say that good food was good.”

Yes, that’s exactly right.

I just wished that Vina Ruu would get that too and stop shooting me such a chilly glare.

“So? Are the rest of you not going to buy any after all? No matter what you say, you’re just scared of giba and the people of the forest’s edge, aren’t you? In that case, you shouldn’t have come over here in the first place. You were trying to look cool, but now you just look like asses.”

“What was that?! You were making fun of the idea of people of the forest’s edge opening a shop in town too, weren’t you?!”

“That’s because I didn’t know giba meat was this delicious... Plus, I only hate the people of the forest’s edge who break the law,” she said, her eyes glancing my way. “Besides, this guy’s so twiggy that he probably couldn’t make much trouble even if he wanted to. Plus, he’s not even a person of the forest’s edge to begin with.”

I wondered if I really looked all that weak, but I still kept a smile on my face.

“There are all sorts of folks among the people of the forest’s edge too. There may be scary people, but there are also kind people. And I believe that it’s only

a small handful of the people of the forest's edge who act poorly towards you townsfolk."

"T-Then what about that monster from before?! He was a person of the forest's edge too, wasn't he?!"

I was about to reply that he was the only one of his type even at the forest's edge, but a newcomer suddenly cut in and asked, "What are you all fussing about?"

He was from Jagar, and had a bit of a stern-looking face.

"If you're not customers, then hurry up and get out of the way. I won't let you off easy if you're trying to interfere with this kid's business."

"W-What? You're not involved, so butt out already!"

"That's my line. If you're not a customer, then *you* better be butting out," he bluntly stated, then he turned my way.

Instantly, he broke out in a grin.

"So you managed to stay open this late for once, huh?! I had work this morning, so I'd just about given up on having a chance to taste your cooking today."

"Thank you for that. We still have over ten meals left for the day, and if things keep going smoothly, I intend to add a second stall from tomorrow on."

I recognized him, but only vaguely. He was probably one of the customers who had arrived first thing yesterday morning. The man may have had a stern face, but he also had a really gentle smile.

"The sun's just about to hit its peak, but you still have around ten meals left, huh?! In that case, you'll probably always stay open at least that long from tomorrow on, right? That'll make a lot of folks happy, I'd imagine."

"Ah, but the dish I'm selling today is different from the one I was selling up until yesterday. If you'd like, you can try a sample."

As I said that I placed a new toothpick on the plate, but the customer from Jagar just said, "Nah, it's fine," and waved me off. "I can tell it's delicious just from the smell. Hurry up and make me one. And how many coins does it cost?"

“Two red coins.”

“So cheap! It’s great for me, but the other food stalls around won’t be able to do any business like that, right?” he said with a hearty laugh, and then he turned and stared at the youths from the west. “I’m sure you all won’t eat giba meat because you’re scared of it, right? Then you’re just in the way, so get lost already. If you’re that afraid of giba, then you can just go and eat kimyuus or karon or whatever, right?”

“I-I already said I wasn’t scared! Don’t go shoving your nose in all high and mighty, you outsider!”

“Don’t be stupid. This whole post town is made up of outsiders, isn’t it? And if there weren’t any outsiders around, then who would you all do business with? Wait... your ancestors must have moved here to Genos from somewhere else too, right?” he said like it was all a pain, waving his hand as if swatting away a fly. “Well, whatever. If folks from the west are too scared to try it, we’ll just help ourselves to all of it. Hurry and serve it up, kid.”

“Right. Thank you.”

It wasn’t like I was caught up in their conversation and neglecting my work, as I had just been waiting for the pot to heat up.

Figuring it was about time, I went to toss in the diced aria... only for the youth with high eyebrows to slap down coins on my counter.

“Hey! Give me one too! I’m not scared of giba or anything!”

With that, just one of the group of frozen youths timidly approached. He looked like he wanted to say something, but instead he just silently offered up his coins.

“Hmph. I paid first, though,” the customer from Jagar said with a scary look on his face.

“It’s no problem! I can have enough for three people ready in no time at all, so just hold on a moment.”

“Ah... Hey, make one more for me, too,” Yumi said and held out her own coins, having completely finished her dish.

“What are you doing that for?! Are you *that* into this guy from the forest’s edge?!”

“I’m telling you, no! I want to take it back to my mom! I wanna see the face she makes when I tell her it was giba meat after she eats it.”

This girl certainly had some mean thoughts rolling around her head.

Still, despite the fact that she really looked the part of a delinquent, she was thinking about bringing back a snack for her mother, which I took to be rather charming.

“Thank you,” I replied, then I tossed in enough aria for four.

Then, around when I added in the giba meat, the youth who had looked like he wanted to say something finally chimed in.

“I... I know about that monster from before. Around once a month he comes into town, eats food from the stalls like that, and then leaves... And apparently if it doesn’t meet his tastes, he smashes the stall to smithereens.”

“T-The guards wouldn’t just stay silent about something like that though, would they?”

“Yeah. But in the end someone from the castle comes out and settles things like it’s nothing. If the people of the forest’s edge get angry at us, we’ll end up with giba ransacking our fields like they used to,” he said in an annoyed tone, then he looked me and Vina Ruu up and down. “I’m not especially scared of giba. But don’t you think that as long as something isn’t done about those guys, people will never really look at you as part of Genos like us?”

“...Thank you for the advice. I’ll be sure to keep it in mind.”

Despite what he said, this youth had bought my cooking too.

My power couldn’t do anything about the Suun clan... But still, all I can do is keep on fighting in my own way.

When I handed over the completed myamuu giba to the three youths from the west and the one man from the south, that left 11 meals.

As the sun rose higher in the sky, the crowds passing by also increased. No other people from the west really came close after that, but around when the

sun hit its peak, we managed to completely sell out.

Selling out with 20 or 50 meals proved to be no problem here in the post town, and even with 70 we sold all of them in around two and a half hours.

And this time around, roughly ten percent of them had sold to folks from the west.

Mida Suun showing up had certainly been unexpected, but even so, I felt a far greater sense of satisfaction from this than I had on the previous days.

“With this, I can go ahead and increase the number of stalls from tomorrow on without any reservations,” I murmured as we were handling the cleanup.

With a bit of a gloomy look on her face, Vina Ruu replied, “That’s true... But that child of the Suun clan concerns me... Asuta, make sure you don’t get nabbed by him, alright?”

“Nabbed? Me?”

“Yes... He seems like he would do something that foolish, doesn’t he?”

“...If he tries, then I’ll run away as fast as I can. Fortunately, I’m at least pretty confident that I’m faster than him.”

“Yes, if he happens to come after us on the way back, then you should run away on your own... I’ll manage to get the luggage back by myself, somehow.”

There really may have been a need to form a plan like that.

Mida Suun didn’t seem like he’d recognize the power of the Ruu, and he may not have even recognized Vina Ruu as a member of that clan in the first place.

“Ugggh, he’s so gross... I just can’t stand that babyish face and voice of his... Asuta, do you know how old he is?”

“No. And I don’t especially want to know, so you don’t need to tell me.”

“...Despite appearances, he’s even younger than Ludo.”

“I said you didn’t need to tell me!”

Somehow, I felt a chill run down my spine.

And also... I found that Tei Suun man every bit as creepy as Mida Suun. It

wasn't about liking him or not. No, I just plain found him eerie.

"From tomorrow on, let's be even more watchful of our surroundings, alright...?"

"Yeah."

I was doing something this flashy, so I didn't expect to escape the Suun clan's notice forever. Still, apparently I needed to watch out not just for Diga and Doddo Suun, but everyone from the clan.

It was a battle being fought atop thin ice, but still, I just had to keep giving it my all.

With those feelings refreshed, I pushed the cart alongside Vina Ruu, through the now more crowded highway full of passersby.

4

Vina Ruu and I returned to the Fa house together, at which point we happened to run into Ai Fa out front.

There were still about two and a half hours till sunset. We wrapped up our sales around when the sun hit its peak, but we still ended up returning home right around when we were scheduled to, as we were taking care of preparations for tomorrow.

As for Ai Fa, I suppose she was returning home just a bit early.

Vina Ruu and I were carrying the metal pot, while Ai Fa had a giba in the 50-kilo range on her back. It would probably make for a pretty amusing composition to an outsider looking in.

"Hey. I'm so glad to see you made it back safely."

"Yes, you as well... Eldest daughter of the Ruu, thank you for your hard work."

"Ah, yeah... Did you take that down, Ai Fa?"

"...Is there any other reason I would be shouldering a giba?" Ai Fa replied in a puzzled tone, then promptly moved towards the house. With that said, though, she still had her heavy luggage weighing her down. "This still needs to be

skinned, so I'll be around back."

"Right, good work there. I've got to set about preparing for dinner and tomorrow, myself."

"Understood."

I had bought a lot today, so I actually had Vina Ruu help me carry things all the way to the door.

As the amount of dishes I was making climbed and climbed, the number of ingredients I needed to bring back increased in turn. When I had bulky items like fruit wine or the giant burdock-esque gigo, the difference in weight was on a whole other level compared to the trip there.

I set down the pot stuffed with those ingredients in front of the door, gave a "Phew..." then turned to face Vina Ruu.

"Well then, good work again today. And I'll be counting on you to do just as well tomorrow too, Vina Ruu."

"Right..." she replied with a nod, a bit of a gloomy expression on her face.

"What's the matter? Is something worrying you?"

"No, it's got nothing to do with work... I was just thinking how Ai Fa really is something..."

"Huh? W-What are you talking about?"

"It's kind of hard to believe, that a woman all on her own could take down a giba that size..." Vina Ruu said with a sigh. "I can certainly understand what you were saying, about how you could never imagine Ai Fa as a bride... She has such a beautiful face, but it feels almost like it would be more fitting for her to be the husband taking some other woman as her bride..."

She sure did have an imagination on her.

But well, it was true that Ai Fa was a lot more gallant than any ordinary man. But despite appearances, every now and again she would show a girlish expression on her face... Still, some things were better left unsaid.

"Well then, I'll be leaving. See you again tomorrow, right...?"

“Yeah. See you tomorrow.”

I went ahead and entered the house, checked to make sure nobody was in the storage space just to be safe, and then put the food away in the pantry.

I returned on schedule today, but I was baking the poitan for our dinners in the morning, allowing me to get plenty of preparation done. For the time being, I decided to start by dicing up the aria for the patties, pulling the knife and cutting board out of the bag, only for Ai Fa to enter the house.

“Huh? What’s up?”

“Well, I still had on my hunter’s attire. If I don’t clean it off first, the smell of blood and meat will cling to it.”

She must have meant the giba pelt cloak.

“I see. Ah, in that case, I’ll clean up for you.”

“Don’t worry about it. I simply wanted to rest a little, after hanging up the giba. There’s still plenty of time till it gets dark, though.”

“Got it. In that case, go ahead and get plenty of rest.”

I glanced over at Ai Fa as she started removing her footwear, while heading over to the pantry to grab some aria.

“You were late today... Actually, this was supposed to be your normal time, wasn’t it?”

“Hmm? Ah, yeah. This is my first time getting back on schedule.”

“So it actually took a fitting amount of time to sell 70 meals?”

“Ah, no, that wasn’t it. We’re going to be increasing the number of stalls from tomorrow on just like we discussed yesterday, so we stopped by the Ruu settlement to discuss that matter.”

After hanging her cloak on the wall and ladling a sip from the water jug, Ai Fa sat down up against the wall by the stove and shot me a dubious look.

“So then, how did your work go?”

“We were done just a bit after the sun hit its peak. Ah, right... Today, the youngest son of the main Suun house, Mida Suun, showed up with a man

named Tei Suun.”

“What?” Ai Fa questioned, her face suddenly growing tense.

“I’ll give you the details later, but I think we’ve got to keep an eye on him for a totally different reason than with someone like Doddo Suun. Seriously, everyone in the Suun clan is just totally unbearable.”

“If the clan head is corrupt, it’s only natural that the same will be true of his clan. But, well... I’m just glad that you’re alright,” she said with a nod and a serious look on her face. She tilted her head. “By the way, did you say just now that you finished your business when the sun hit its peak?”

“Hmm? Yeah, it was just past that.”

“...You’re saying you sold 70 meals in that short of a period of time?”

“That’s right. The customers were pretty much all from the south and east like always, though. But today, I finally managed to sell to three passersby from the west!”

With a smile, I turned to face her without even thinking, only to find Ai Fa a lot closer than I had expected, frozen in an awkward position, half-standing with her right arm extended out towards me.

“...What is it, Ai Fa?”

“Ah, no, it seems I was just on the verge of grabbing your head again without thinking,” she replied with a stern look on her face, then she slowly lowered her arm. “That was a close one.”

Is that so?

I mean, you didn’t need to go that far just to slam on the brakes...

A hug would be pretty bad for my heart, but I’d just feel a bit embarrassed from having my head stroked.

Wait, what did she mean when she said she was going to grab my head, there?

“Well anyway, we’re going to increase the number of stalls from tomorrow on, as planned. We’ll also move to having four people working them. The plan is

that the Ruu clan will also loan me Lala and Sheera Ruu.”

“Sheera Ruu?”

“Shin Ruu’s elder sister. Um, you should have seen her back during the Rutim banquet. Do you not remember her?”

“Ah... That willowy girl with the heavy-lidded eyes, is it?”

“Willowy” was a pretty un-Ai Fa way of phrasing things.

“She certainly was charming.”

“Huh?”

“She looked a little weak, but I’d imagine she’s just the type of woman you’d want as a bride.”

Even you were looking at people with a male gaze, now?

Well, at least it wasn’t as bad for my heart as hearing her talk about what an ideal man would be.

“Yeah, and she’s a skilled cook. I couldn’t ask for better help. I’m looking forward to seeing how things will go from tomorrow on.”

Ai Fa fell silent.

“Hmm? What is it?”

“This is a big difference compared to that pathetic face from last night. Your face and eyes are both brimming with power.”

“Give me a break about last night already. I really was just plain tired,” I said with a strained smile, scratching my head.

With that, Ai Fa got down on her knees right in front of me.

Soon, she drew in close to my face, and weirdly stopped.

“W-What is it, Ai Fa?”

“Ah, I was just about to unthinkingly cradle your head in my arms again,” Ai Fa said with a big nod and a stern look. “That really was a close one.”

Is that so?

Wait, just how serious was she being, anyway?

Well, she was probably being completely serious about all of it, knowing her.

“Don’t worry. I’m striving to not do things that you find unpleasant.”

Finding it unpleasant was not exactly the problem.

Feeling how steep the path to mutual understanding was, I gave a little sigh.

And then, I noticed a sweet aroma creeping into my nostrils the second Ai Fa drew near.

“Huh...? This is the smell of giba summoning fruit, isn’t it?”

Instantly, Ai Fa’s face turned beet red right in front of my very eyes.

“Asuta, no matter how many times I tell you—”

“No, that’s not what I meant! Did you start doing sacrificial hunting again?”

Ai Fa shifted to a pout, her cheeks still red.

“It’s not sacrificial hunting. I’ve just been setting traps using giba summoning fruit. But when you cut that fruit, the smell spreads at an incredible pace, so a considerable amount of the scent clings to me.”

“I see... But you didn’t need to start using the giba summoning fruit the second the number of giba started decreasing, right? If it’s about the meat for my cooking, if we run out then we have plans to get more from the Ruu clan. You’re already doing plenty enough to fulfill your duty, aren’t you?”

Apparently, the giba had eaten up the food in this area and were now in the process of heading south, but Ai Fa was still managing to catch them at a rate of one every other day. Just looking at yesterday and today, she caught one each day.

It was true that the more hunting was done, the less damage there would be to the western fields, but earning the horns and tusks she needed to live should be plenty for handling her duty. The Ruu and Rutim also thought like that when calculating out how many they needed to hunt.

As a house of two, we only needed one giba every five days in order to have enough horns and tusks. And Ai Fa had done that multiple times over these past

twenty days, so I didn't think she needed to go and expose herself to danger by using the giba summoning fruit...

Even so, Ai Fa kept on pouting.

"I told you, I'm not doing sacrificial hunting. I've used giba summoning fruit in traps since before I met you. Stop grumbling pointless complaints."

"I'm not really complaining or anything, it's just... I mean, you remember how when we visited the Ruu settlement together, we heard about Darmu Ruu getting injured? That turned out to be pretty serious, and he apparently still can't head out into the forest."

"...What of it?"

"No, it's just... Aren't you worried about getting injured?"

"Hmph!" Ai Fa snorted, turning away.

Then, she glared at me out of the corner of her eye.

"If I'm injured, then I'll deal with that when it happens."

"Ah, but..."

"Before I met you, I got injured more frequently. There were countless times when I couldn't head into the forest for several days... But it's also a hunter's duty to strive to live just a little longer, and hunt even a few more giba. I'm not treating my life as frivolously as you believe."

"I see," I replied, having to just accept it at this point. "Got it. Sorry, I was in the wrong there. I guess my resolve about this kind of thing still isn't quite firmed up..."

"...It's only natural to worry about the members of your house. I'm not criticizing you about it or anything," she said in a somewhat gentle tone, but there was still a bit of a light shining in her eyes. "But stop bringing up how I smell all the time. I find it unpleasant."

"Oh, so that was the issue?" I said, unwittingly letting an awkward chuckle slip out. "I wasn't going out of my way to comment on your smell or anything. I was just curious because I smelled the giba summoning fruit. Wouldn't you find it strange if I was giving off a different scent than normal, too?"

“...I’ve never paid attention to how people smell.”

“It’s not like I pay a ton of attention to it either. It’s just... the giba summoning fruit smells really good, so I notice it right away.”

“Like I said! I told you to stop saying stuff like that!” Ai Fa firmly stated, grabbing me by both arms.

And her face was positively beet red all the while.

“I’m striving not to do anything you find unpleasant, but what about you?! Do you enjoy making me feel such unpleasantries?!”

“N-No, of course not! I was talking about the smell of the giba summoning fruit, not you! And come on, you’re way overreacting here!”

In a panic, I lifted my hands up to try to get her to tap the breaks on this car.

And then, Ai Fa grabbed me by the collar and uttered in a low voice, “...Isn’t that unfair?”

“Unfair?”

“You just act as you please, so why do I alone have to whittle away at my own heart?”

“W-Whittle at your heart? Do you mean how you were holding back from stroking my head? You don’t have to force yourself that hard...”

“...In that case, can I act as I please, too?”

Huh?

Was she talking about squeezing me all tight again?

“W-Well, I mean, if it’s causing you a burden, then I think you can just go ahead and do as you please...”

Seriously, what was with this exchange?

If I were looking in from the outside, I would probably burst out laughing at how ridiculous it was.

“...Hmph,” Ai Fa snorted, pushing me away.

Was she going to go for a hug? Was that it?

No... With her face still all red, Ai Fa gallantly rose to her feet.

“You and I are different. You may be a completely baffling fool, but I intend to follow my own way.”

What an exaggerated way of putting things.

But even so, I bowed my head and said, “You have my deepest apologies. I’ll strive harder to make sure not to cause you to feel unpleasant. Now, how about we put an end to this fruitless argument and get to our work?”

“Hmph,” Ai Fa snorted again, and walked towards the door. “What will tonight’s dinner be?”

“It can be anything. What should we go with?”

Ai Fa suddenly stopped.

Then, after a rather sizable wait, she uttered, “Hamburgers,” then puffed up her chest with pride as if to say, “How about that?”

In all likelihood she was boasting about how she didn’t give a knee jerk response, but that apparently still hadn’t changed her answer.

“That’s right. Last night was myamuu giba, while the night before was shabu-shabu, so let’s just go with normal hamburgers for tonight.”

“Yes,” Ai Fa replied, putting on her footwear.

With that, I at last turned to face the cutting board.

Hmm... Right, I was making patties for giba burgers.

First was chopping up aria.

I calculated that I had enough time to make the patties first then get to work on dinner as I pulled my old man’s knife from its white magnolia sheathe.

In that very instant, I got an incredibly strong hug from behind.

My whole body was hugged, arms included, and soft hair brushed up against my ears.

Just when I was about to shriek out a “Wah!” that warm body that felt anything but unpleasant smoothly pulled back.

“You fool. You let your guard down,” Ai Fa said with a smile, boasting of her victory. “If you don’t wish to face such unpleasant feelings, be more careful with your words and actions in the future.”

That wasn’t it. That wasn’t it at all, my lady.

As I wrung my hands in frustration, I thoroughly reflected on how harsh the path to mutual understanding truly was.



Chapter 2: The Fifth Day—Roaring Business

1

It was my fifth day of business, and just as planned, we added a second stall.

However, despite the fact that Lala and Sheera Ruu were supposed to come to the post town directly from the Ruu settlement, there was no sign of them even when we started setting up for business in our usual spot.

“They’re late... Won’t it be a big commotion again if they don’t show up soon...?”

There were even more customers surrounding the stalls than yesterday, and as always the guards with their spears at the ready looked seriously on edge.

“It’ll be fine. But let’s start getting ready as slowly as possible.”

As I gazed over at the unmanned stall to the side, I started dicing up the tino for the giba burgers.

The plan was to borrow the pot for the myamuu giba from the Ruu clan, and I had asked Sheera Ruu to make the poitan for that stall, so it wouldn’t be possible to open till they arrived.

As long as we were borrowing a pot anyway, there was no need for Lala and Sheera Ruu to come by way of the Fa house. In that way, we cut out the two hours needed for the round trip between the Ruu settlement and the Fa house, so I asked them to handle the gathering of firewood and baking of poitan using that time.

Thanks to that, I was able to prepare 60 of each meal for today, making for 120 in total.

Regardless of how things had gone so far, it was going to be difficult to sell that much. But with this, I should finally be able to remain here in the post town for the amount of time I had allotted.

If we spent the scheduled time of a little over five hours, just how many meals

could we sell? I couldn't stop myself from trembling just thinking about it.

"...If all of those sell, it will be 240 red coins... Just how many giba's worth of horns and tusks would that be...?"

"If we're talking horns and tusks from grown giba, it'd be exactly 20, right? But if we remove the expenses it would be 150 red coins, or roughly 13 giba worth."

I had already at least calculated out that much.

Thinking of it from another angle, if we didn't even sell a single meal it would be seven giba worth of losses, which I needed to calculate in advance, too.

"13 giba in a single day... That's a big enough number to just make you sort of go numb, isn't it?"

"I mean, it'll be tricky to sell all of them, though. You shouldn't get your hopes up that high."

"Really...? I have a harder time imagining having any left over, though..."

As we had that conversation, we slowly and steadily prepared. After a long while, I suddenly heard a voice energetically shout out, "Let us through!" from the other side of the crowd.

Our reinforcements had arrived.

"Sorry for the wait! We thought we were arriving just in time, but were we late?"

It was the third daughter of the main Ruu house, Lala Ruu. I shot a smile at the girl with her pure red hair in a ponytail and said, "You're fine. We probably just arrived early. From tomorrow on, let's meet up behind the inn."

"I see. Got it. Ugh, this is heavy... Can we leave the pot here?"

"Yeah, that's good. Thanks a ton. You too, Sheera Ruu."

"It's nothing. I'm perfectly fine with this much weight," the girl from one of the branch families responded with a smile. Her blackish-brown hair was done up behind her head, and she had a bit of a fleeting feel about her for a woman of the forest's edge.

The baked poitan were inside the pot, wrapped up in a cloth. And they were carrying the firewood Lala Ruu had gathered over the course of two hours on their backs, split between the two of them.

Sheera Ruu had some trouble in terms of strength and stamina, but if she could transport this much luggage, then she didn't quite fit my image of a frail girl. She just wasn't strong by the standards of the able-bodied women of the forest's edge.

By the way, they were both clad for the post town with veils and shawls, and Sheera Ruu had a beautifully-colored skirt that went down to her ankles, wonderfully complementing her neat and tidy appearance.

"Alright. We'll be doing things like we discussed yesterday, so first up Vina and Sheera Ruu will be handling the giba burgers, while Lala Ruu will be together with me on the myamuu giba."

"Yup," "Got it," "Alright," they all replied.

We were surrounded by such a big crowd, and this was Sheera and Lala Ruu's first time doing the job, but they showed no signs of hesitating. It must have been down to how the people of the forest's edge were used to the townsfolk staring at them.

While we waited for the pots to heat up, Sheera Ruu and I each started dicing vegetables in our respective stalls. I had visited the Ruu settlement yesterday to explain everything in advance, so the two newcomers were working perfectly smoothly.

"For now, I'll be in charge of the cooking over here. Lala Ruu, you remember how to finish them up after they're cooked, right?"

"Yeah. And if Vina Ruu can do it, it should be easy for me."

That was a pretty difficult comment for me to reply to.

But for the sake of Vina Ruu's honor, just let me note that she wasn't especially clumsy or anything. She may have burned the meat before while manning the stove, but at least here in the post town, she hadn't made any significant mistakes.

“Still, there sure are a ton of people. I can definitely see how you could make several hundred coins with things like this,” Lala Ruu said undaunted while looking out over the dozens of customers.

On the third day it was less than 20, yesterday on the fourth day it was just over 30, and today on the fifth day... It looked to be a bit over 40. The folks from Sym were just silently standing there, while the Jagar group was making a commotion. Any passersby who knew nothing of what was going on may just think that the antagonistic folks from Sym and Jagar were breaking the law and were about to start fighting.

“Alright, looks like that should be about good.”

I went ahead and tossed the sliced aria into the freshly heated pot.

It was about 15 people’s worth, or seven aria in total.

That alone was enough to get the Jagar group all worked up, and when I went ahead and added just under 30 kilos of giba meat, they were full on cheering.

“Whoa, that smells good... So this is that myamuu stuff?”

“That’s right. It’s not all that expensive of an ingredient, so I definitely think you could buy some for the Ruu house if you’d like,” I responded to Lala Ruu with a smile, stirring with a wooden spatula all the while so that the large quantity of meat and aria wouldn’t burn.

Lala Ruu’s eyes, blue like the color of the ocean, blinked in surprise.

“Asuta... How should I put it...? You look ridiculously happy right now, don’t you?”

“Huh? R-Really?”

“Yeah. You always look like you’re enjoying yourself when you’re cooking, but this may be the first time I’ve seen you *that* happy.”

As she said that, Lala Ruu also bared her teeth in a joyful smile.

I got the impression that Lala Ruu had some serious insight and sensitivity, so I couldn’t help but feel embarrassed hearing her say that.

So on the fifth day of business, I finally had enough leeway to enjoy myself,

huh? It was true that yesterday I was just praying there wouldn't be an incident, so I was more on edge than anything else.

As that thought ran through my head, I tossed in the marinade to finish things off, causing the aroma of myamuu and fruit wine to explode forth, stirring up the folks from Jagar even further.

"H-Hey, come on already! Is the food still not ready?" one of the guards asked, having run over looking all flustered.

"Yes, it just needs one more push. I think they can start lining up soon."

I wasn't especially feeling nervous or anything, so I answered him with a smile.

The folks from Jagar certainly were all worked up, but nobody seemed to be going overboard or trying to pick a fight with the group from Sym or anything. In fact, from looking at them, I even seemed to sense a sort of leadership at work.

The incident from two days ago was due to the food running out. On top of that, they saw the group from Sym beating them to the punch, so their frustrations came exploding forth.

The folks from Jagar seemed pretty frank about their feelings, but right now their faces were just plain sparkling with joy. A good number of them were definitely on the older side, yet they all wore innocent smiles.

Of course I'd feel happy with my customers showing me faces like that, I thought, then I turned to face the giba burger stall.

"Vina Ruu, are you good over there?"

"Yup, just perfect."

"Alright, then we're open for business! Please order in groups of five each!" I yelled out just loud enough that I wouldn't get scolded by the guards.

The first group to come up to the stand were from Jagar.

"Lala Ruu, you can accept the coins and hand over the completed dishes, right?"

“I’m on it.”

Lala Ruu wrapped up the cooked meat and diced tino in baked poitan, then handed them over one after another.

The next five were from Sym, and then it was a group from Jagar again. And in no time at all, we had used up that 15 meals worth of meat.

“Sorry! Please hold on just a moment!”

The fire was still lit under the pot, so I chucked some fresh aria and meat on in.

As that heated up I looked over to see how the neighboring stall was doing, only to hear Vina Ruu happily proclaim, “Sorry, please hold on just a moment...”

So they had already sold 20 meals over there, huh?

Added to the meals we sold, that made for 35 in total... And yet, the crowd still didn’t feel like it had thinned all that much.

“Sheera Ruu, are you alright?”

“Yes. At least for now...”

As she was the most skilled of the group, I left the preparations for the supplemental tarapa sauce to Sheera Ruu.

And from what I could see, she didn’t seem to be making any mistakes.

In the meantime the meat had finished cooking on our side, so I moved it over to a plate and called out, “Vina Ruu, switch with me.”

I then moved on over to the giba burger stall, entrusting the creation of the myamuu giba to Vina Ruu.

“Good work. Yeah, this looks good.”

The pure red tarapa sauce was giving off a pleasant simmering sound as it boiled.

When I tossed in crumbled rock salt and pico leaves, a customer called out, “Hey,” in a low tone.

It was a somewhat younger man from Jagar. In all likelihood, he was one of

the members of the construction group who had been stopping by every day since three days ago.

“It’s still not ready? It’s just awful to be teasing me at this point, isn’t it?”

“My apologies! It’ll be just a little bit longer!” I replied while bowing my head, then I added the patties from the leather bag into the tarapa sauce. Now all that was left was to heat them, then they would be ready.

“This is amazing... I’d heard about it, but I still didn’t think it would be this bustling,” Sheera Ruu quietly whispered. “And I’m truly grateful to you for giving me this work, Asuta. Now I can earn coins and relieve Shin Ruu of some of his burden.”

“Ah, don’t thank me. Mia Lea and Donda Ruu were the ones to choose you. I just asked for a woman who was good at manning the stove.”

It wasn’t flattery or anything. No, I felt Sheera Ruu’s cooking skills really were foremost among the people of the Ruu settlement. The only ones who could compete with her were probably Reina and Mia Lea Ruu.

When she joined our forces, a secret ambition started taking shape in my mind. Sometime in the future, I’d like to see if I could entrust the management of one of the stalls entirely to the Ruu clan.

If that happened, then the Ruu clan could be earning just as many coins as the Fa clan. I mean, I just couldn’t help but feel bad about paying just six red coins when I was even leaving the poitan baking up to them.

Of course, I may need to keep an eye on things for several months before I can even consider that.

At any rate, the patties had heated up plenty, so I turned towards Vina Ruu again and said, “Alright, Vina Ruu, I’ll leave this up to you! Ah... We’re going to start selling again, so please hold on just a moment!”

With that I returned to the myamuu giba stall, only to find that almost all the meat I had added was already gone.

But looking around, the crowd of customers seemed like it was finally starting to thin out.

“Lala Ruu, can I leave it to you to finish up and sell the dishes?”

“Yeah, that’s fine. I mean, I’m probably better at this than Vina.”

This younger sister sure didn’t show any mercy.

However, it was also hard to imagine anyone more reliable.

“Well then, I’ll leave that up to you while I make up another batch.”

From a quick glance, it looked like we had around ten customers left over here.

However, the customers who had already made their purchases were standing in the back happily smacking their lips, so it was no less lively.

Still, 30 customers first thing in the morning, huh...? Things are almost going a little too well, I’d say.

There was also the fact that it took time to cook up more giba burgers, so the customers who couldn’t wait any longer flowed over to the myamuu giba stand.

Still, thirty meals was exactly half of what we had prepared. And the giba burger stall had customers lining up for those 20 meals we just added, so they seemed to be selling pretty well, too.

At this rate, would we really last the remaining five hours?

As that question ran through my head, a tremble ran down my back.

“Two please, Asuta!” a voice called out, from a dark brown haired head in the middle of all the adults. It was my usual little regular, Tara.

“Hey there, thanks for your continued business. You just need two today?”

“Yeah! For the guys from the cloth and pot stores! I’m going to have a giba burger!”

“So is Dora having a giba burger too, then?” I asked while preparing the dishes for the customers from Sym and Jagar who got there first, but Tara’s eyebrows drooped a bit, making her look a little sad.

“Dad said he’s not having any today. He’s been all down since this morning.”

“Huh? Is he not feeling well?”

“I don’t know. He said he’d probably be alright again tomorrow, though...” she replied, her gaze cast downwards and looking sad. But then, Lala Ruu thrust out the myamuu giba towards her.

“Here. Two of them will be four red coins.”

“Thanks! Ah... Nice to meet you!”

“Huh? Ah, yeah. You too...”

Lala Ruu was clearly trying to figure the girl out, but Tara just shot her a bright smile back.

It would seem that Tara felt a lot less fear of the people of the forest’s edge nowadays. In the back of my mind, I seriously wished she hadn’t run into Mida Suun yesterday.

“Tara, I’ll stop by again to buy vegetables once we’re done here with the shop. So give my regards to Dora and let him know, alright?”

“Yeah! Okay, see you later!”

With that, Tara took off running.

The next person to show up was Aldas, from the construction group.

“Hey there. I ended up oversleeping a bit today... Ooh, so this is your new dish, huh?”

“Ah, welcome! Thanks for your continued business. Would you like to try a sample?”

Now that I thought about it, everybody had just gone ahead and ordered the myamuu giba, so I had completely forgotten to even put out the plate of samples.

“No need. But go ahead and prepare a few for these guys,” Aldas said, moving his large body aside and letting four grim-faced folks from Jagar step forward.

I got so many customers each day that I was having trouble remembering all their faces... but I definitely recognized the stout older man at the front.

He was the guy in charge of the construction group, who they called Pops.

This was the man who had completely rejected my giba burgers back on our

second day of business.

“...Thank you so much for coming!”

“Hmph. Aldas wouldn’t stop begging me, so I didn’t have much of a choice. But no matter how you flavor it, giba meat’s still giba meat, right? Why’d I have to come all the way out here just to have such a lousy meal? Seriously, what a pain...”

Apparently his sharp tongue still fired off like a machine gun.

Then, with a stern look gleaming in his green eyes, he looked over the surroundings.

“Who’d have thought this world would be this full of idiots with no taste whatsoever? If they like giba so much, then they should all go chase them around the forest. Hey, I’m so hungry I could die. Let’s hurry up and get this farce over with so I can go get some karon to eat.”

“Right! Please hold on just a moment!”

I pulled the plate for samples on out of the bag, moved over just a bit of cooked meat that was still giving off steam, then placed down four toothpicks and held it out.

“Hmph,” Pops snorted, but he was the first one to reach out.

As I watched that out of the corner of my eye, I prepared Aldas’s myamuu giba. And knowing nothing of the circumstances, Lala Ruu was shooting Pops’s group a dubious look.

Without even a pause, Pops tossed the chunk of meat on into his mouth.

The other three followed in turn, their faces making it clear they were only doing it because they were pressured into it.

And while that was going on, Aldas happily shouted out, “Whoa, this is delicious! I already couldn’t get enough of the smell, but tasting it, this is a work of art! I thought you would never be able to come up with a tastier dish than that tarapa one, so I had really underestimated it. From tomorrow on, I’ll be buying this one.”

“Thank you!”

There were still customers from Sym behind them, so I couldn't afford to take a break from my work.

I stole a peek over at Pops while secretly feeling all anxious inside, but his expression looked every bit as displeased as always as he chewed away.

"...It's no good," one of the youths from Jagar muttered.

I felt my heart skip a beat.

"Yeah, I agree," an older man from Jagar agreed, shaking his head.

So... it was no good after all, huh?

It had been three days. I hadn't seen any other folks from Jagar looking so openly displeased since then, but I suppose some things were just plain impossible.

But even so, it was thanks to their disapproval that I had set my sights on strong seasonings to begin with. And I thought this myamuu giba really was the perfect dish for customers from the west who were resistant to the idea of giba meat.

It was a shame that I wasn't able to satisfy Pops and the rest, but it would probably be difficult to do so at this point even if I fixated on that. Feeling a bit more lonesome than frustrated, I went to say, "My apologies."

However, Aldas beat me to it and said loudly, "What was no good? Isn't it crazy delicious?" with a big grin on his face. He really looked euphoric as he bit into his myamuu giba.

The one older gentleman who hadn't talked till now gave a strained smile and patted Pops on the shoulder.

"Pops, let's give up already. It's just no good at this point."

Even so, Pops remained silent. Or more accurately, he just kept on chewing.

Was it some sort of appeal to the fact that the meat was too hard to chew through or something?

I'd be very grateful if he told me exactly what he was dissatisfied with... Thinking that, I started to lean forward, but then the youth who had muttered

that it was no good suddenly approached the stall.

Then, he held out two red coins.

“I didn’t like that mushy meat, but this was delicious. I’ll buy one, too.”

“Huh...? Ah, r-right!”

I hurriedly grabbed a baked poitan, and then another of the men from Jagar held out coins.

“Me too. Back then I said it wasn’t good, but honestly, I never liked tarapa to start with. But I didn’t think the giba meat itself was all that bad.”

“T-Thank you.”

As I prepared another myamuu giba, I stole another glance at Pops.

The man who had patted Pops on the shoulder still had an awkward grin on his face, and now he was scratching his head with his thick fingers.

“I didn’t like the smell of that meat from before, but that didn’t bother me at all with the stuff I ate just now. Hey, is that seriously giba meat, too?”

“Yes. It’s a different cut and it’s seasoned differently, but it’s giba meat.”

“I see. Well, it’s true that it’s definitely not karon, and it doesn’t seem like kimyuus either. Yeah, holding out is no good. I admit defeat... Hey, I’ll have one too.”

“Thank you,” I started to say.

But then, Pops angrily yelled out, “Give me a break!” and drowned me out.

Then, he stomped on up and slapped his palms down on my counter.

“Hey, just what in the world is going on here?!”

“W-What do you mean...?”

“The smell, taste, and even texture are totally different, aren’t they? As if I could believe something as crazy as this being giba meat, too.”

Pops’s voice soon returned to its usual volume, but he was looking seriously displeased.

“Um... The dish from before was made by chopping up meat and balling it

back together, so that's why the texture is different. And in regards to the taste and smell, I used a fruit wine and myamuu marinade to combat the strong quirkiness of giba meat," I replied while making up the dishes for the three who had paid me.

"So this sweetness is from fruit wine, huh? I see. Now that you mention it, sugar is more valuable than salt here in Genos, isn't it?" the other oldtimer besides Pops replied. "Most places in Genos use lots of salt as seasoning. So I'm sure lots of folks will appreciate this sweet and salty flavor... At the very least, I love it."

"T-Thank you."

The three other than Pops were all giving embarrassed-looking smiles. It was like they were thinking some kid had gone and got one over on them.

As for Pops... He was still standing right in front of the stall, looking like a bundle of umbrage.

"...Pops. I don't know what you're so dissatisfied about, but if you keep on standing planted there, you'll interfere with business, won't you?"

"Ah, it's still alright for the moment. It looks like I've run out of other customers."

It would be hard to increase my menu any further, but if I could improve the dish then I'd certainly like to do so. So if Pops had an opinion to give, I'd love to hear it.

In the meantime, Lala Ruu handed over the completed myamuu giba to the other three men from Jagar.

"Ah, this is seriously tasty!"

"Yeah, it's so good."

"Who would have thought giba meat was so delicious? I can't imagine anyone believing us when we go back home and tell them about this."

The three men all had truly joyful smiles on their faces, just like their comrades.

Then, hearing those words, Pops finally spoke up again.

“...Can you prove that this is giba meat?”

“Huh?”

I was taken aback.

“It’s not like you prepared a giba in front of us. So can you prove that this meat really came from one?”

“You’re going and saying something weird again. At the very least this isn’t kimyuus or karon meat, right?” Aldas said with a strained smile, but Pops wasn’t backing down.

“It’s not just giba on Mount Morga. There are giiz and mundt too, right? There’s no guarantee this is giba meat.”

With that, one of the men chewing on myamuu giba said, “Don’t say those names while I’m eating.”

“That’s right, Pops. You shouldn’t be bringing up names like that in a place like this. As if you could eat meat from those animals.”

“Then what about the giant madarama snakes and varb wolves?!”

“Um... Those creatures eat humans, so wouldn’t it be even stranger for their meat to taste good instead of a giba’s? What you’re saying is seriously crazy, Pops,” Aldas responded, sounding completely astounded.

With that, Pops muttered, “I see...” and seemed to have the energy completely drain out of him.

His big green eyes stared at me, looking completely dispirited.

“Then this really is giba meat...?”

“Yes. Both that meat from before and this meat all came from giba,” I said with a nod, completely unable to tell what Pops was thinking.

Pops gave a deep, heavy sigh.

“...I was wrong.”

“What?”

“I was wrong when I said that giba meat was awful. It was true that I thought

so about the meat from last time, but the meat from today was delicious enough to die for. It's because of your poor skill that I thought it tasted bad back then, not because of the giba meat."

That may have been so, but I still had no clue at all why Pops had been so depressed.

"I only like the leg meat from karon when it's sliced thinly."

"Huh? A-Ah, right."

"Boiled kimyuus is out of the question. It's at its tastiest when it's grilled."

"Right..."

"Giba meat also has cooking methods where it tastes good, and others where it doesn't. That's all there is to it, huh?"

Then, Pops gave a sigh that made it sound like the world was ending.

"And yet, I went and said something stupid like giba wasn't worth eating... I'm embarrassed by how much of an idiot I was."

"P-Please don't worry about that, sir!"

So this was how it went when the emotional folks from Jagar got all down in the dumps, huh?

I couldn't help but feel a bit flustered, honestly.

"Um, I had thought such a unique dish would attract the attention of everyone from around the post town, but it also probably isn't the right way to introduce people to giba meat. Because you came out and said that clearly, I was able to realize my own mistake."

"But..."

"It's the same in regards to the seasoning. The other clear complaints that you voiced acted as advice for me."

I didn't know if it was right or not for me to be exposing my feelings like this, but I felt like I had to say it.

"I felt very frustrated when you said it was bad. But thanks to that, I decided to think more deeply about it. And so, I'm very grateful to you."

“...I see,” Pops quietly muttered. “But because of that, now I’m the one who has to feel frustrated.”

“Ah... That is, my apologies...”

“It’s nothing to apologize about. I mean, even I can admit I’m wrong, but I still don’t feel like bowing to you.”

As he said that, he gave the counter a light slap. And where his hand had come down, there were now two red coins.

“I’ll pay money for food this good. But I’ve got work after this, so hurry up and make it.”

With that, Pops finally regained his usual brazen expression, a big grin on his face.

2

The first half of this match was at an end.

Though with that said, we’d only just gotten through the morning rush and were no more than an hour into work. But in that short time, we had sold 34 giba burgers and 37 myamuu giba. Even compared to yesterday, we were running 1.5 times as fast.

Plus, normally there weren’t many passersby at this time of day, but it felt like there was a strangely large amount of people around. But rather than there being more people passing through, there just seemed to be people sprinkled here and there along the highway.

There was a group gathered off to the side, whispering away. Girls sneaking glances as they looked through the goods at the neighboring accessory shop. Even an oldtimer standing in the middle of the road and staring straight at us. And all of them were folks from the west with yellowish-brown or ivory-white skin.

Each day up until now, the onlookers had disappeared alongside the large initial crowd of customers dispersing, but something seemed different this time. Had my shop finally become a presence the people of the west couldn’t just

turn a blind eye towards? They must have been incredibly curious as to why folks from the south and east were so obsessed with giba meat cooking.

“Oh hey, now we’ve got nothing to do. It’s not going to be like this the rest of the time, is it, Asuta?”

“No. The flow of passersby will pick up after the sun hits its peak. Normally, that’s the main time for a stall to make its earnings.”

However, the folks from the east and south had been gathering first thing in the morning out of fear of me selling out. But if I could start consistently staying open for business until the early afternoon, the customers would surely become more spread out. I’d need to actually stay open till then, though.

“Hmm, should I have prepared more myamuu giba? I never thought I would sell through nearly 40 of them in the morning alone...”

“I told you, right...? I’m sure we won’t have a single one left today, either...”
Vina Ruu said with a smile from the neighboring stall.

“But it really is just folks from the south and east coming to buy from us, huh? The only one from the west was that little squirt, right?” Lala Ruu said as she looked around with a bit of frustration showing in her eyes. “If they don’t have any intention of buying anything, then why are they staring at us? It’s creepy.”

“That’s fine by me. It won’t be possible to get them to try a sample without drawing their attention first. Personally, I consider this some serious progress.”

“Hmph,” Lala Ruu snorted, making it clear that she just couldn’t accept that.

“Now then, since the flow of customers seems to have slowed, how about trying a sample? Or are you still not hungry yet?”

“Huh...? I mean, of course I’m starving after smelling this delicious food. But if there’s extra, wouldn’t that be better to sell to the townsfolk?”

“It’s not extra. Just stuff that I solely prepared to serve as samples. I mean, I went and baked poitan just for that.”

As I said that, I pulled the poitan in question out of their wrapping.

“Whoa, what’s that? They’re really tiny!”

“Yeah. They’re just for employees.”

They were a size smaller than the poitan used for the giba burgers, with a diameter of around ten centimeters. And they were on the thin side, so I only needed to use about a third of a poitan for them.

“Handle the shop for just a bit, alright? They’ll be ready soon.”

I removed two little eight centimeter patties out of the leather bag. At only around two centimeters thick, they were quite the cute little things.

After warming them up in the pot, I went ahead and assembled two mini giba burgers.

“Here, thanks for waiting. Today the customers seem really fired up, so maybe you should eat them a bit away from the stall.”

“Thank you... They look really tasty, don’t they?” Sheera Ruu remarked with a smile.

When I returned to the myamuu giba stall and handed Lala Ruu hers, she gave a little “Hehehe,” that reminded me of Ludo Ruu.

And sure enough, when the two of them moved to the free space off to the right and started enjoying their samples, Vina Ruu shot me a sad look.

“There’s enough for you too, so just be patient for the moment. We can’t exactly have all three of you step away from the stalls at once, can we?”

“Huh...? I can eat some too...?”

“Of course. We’ve got more people helping now, but I’ll make sure to prepare enough for everyone each day,” I replied, only for Vina Ruu to stretch out her right hand as far as it could go, two meters away from me.

“I can’t reach...”

Of course you can’t.

And wait, was it a rule or something that she had to grab my clothes when she was feeling happy?

As I thought that, I moved the brazier from outside back into the myamuu giba stall, then heated the meat and aria left on the wooden plate back up to

temperature.

Then, I prepared two itty bitty myamuu giba by splitting some baked poitan in half.

“Lala Ruu, since it’s your first day working here I’d like to have you try both. Do you think you can eat more, though?”

With that, Lala Ruu came running over, slapped me firmly on the back, and proudly declared, “Of course I can!”

From Lala Ruu’s point of view she was probably just showing some physical intimacy, but it sure did sting.

Vina Ruu and I also ate a little to fill our stomachs afterwards, and in the meantime only a single customer from Jagar placed an order.

However, I got the feeling that the number of onlookers from the west on the side of the road was growing. As I wondered whether or not there was some way to get them to come a bit closer, since I was forbidden from calling out loudly or leaving the stall to usher them over, I noticed a familiar group approaching from the north.

There were five of them, and they all wore leather cloaks. Four of them headed to the giba burger stall, while just one of them came over here.

When he took down his hood, I saw that it was indeed Shumiral of The Silver Vase.

“Asuta, we are late.”

“Welcome! Will you be making a purchase?”

“No. Today, is the day, to order that dish.”

Just when I was about to ask him why he came to this stall in that case, he said, “I wanted, to greet you, Asuta.”

After giving a small nod to Lala Ruu, who he was meeting for the first time, Shumiral’s black eyes turned towards my work station.

“That blade...”

“Yes?”

“I’ve never, seen one of that shape. Is it, from the west?”

“No, it came from the same place as me.”

“Where, do you come from?”

“...A country called Japan. Everyone always tells me they’ve never heard of it, though.”

“Japan. I do not, know it.”

As he talked to me, Shumiral’s eyes remained fixed on the kitchen knife.

“That blade, is beautiful. May I look, more closely?”

“Huh? Ah, no... I don’t think I can let a customer touch one of my cooking tools, unfortunately.”

“I don’t, need to touch. Can I, look closer?”

What was going on here?

It wasn’t as if I distrusted Shumiral or anything, but folks from Sym just didn’t let their emotions show, so I couldn’t help but feel uneasy.

After hesitating for a few seconds, I grabbed hold of the scabbard, then pointed the blade straight down, held at around chest level.

He was quite tall, so Shumiral leaned down a bit and stared firmly at the blade.

“...It’s beautiful. The craftsmanship, is wonderful.”

“Thank you.”

“I can tell, that you treat it well. If you don’t do that, a lovely tool, will lose that loveliness.”

I wasn’t the one who had used it so carefully, though.

Of course, I was employing all of my knowledge and experience, and was quite careful when using the unfamiliar whetstones of this world... But my old man was the one who had treated it so well for 20 years.

I felt my emotions getting seriously tugged on there, so I went ahead and placed the knife back on the work station.

“Jagar is famous, for its iron. They have, lots of iron. Iron is rare, in Sym.”

“Ah, is that so?”

“In Sym, iron, is precious. And so, we treat it, carefully.”

As he said that, Shumiral pulled a single knife out from inside his cloak.

It was held in a black leather sheath, and looked to be a bit over 20 centimeters long. It was about the same length as my kitchen knife, but it was about twice as thick. The handle was made of black wood, with a swirling pattern lightly carved into it.

“Iron, is precious. In Sym, blade craftsmen, breath life, into their work.”

Wasn't that just the sort of occupation swordsmithing was, even in places with plentiful metal?

But still, it was true that I was feeling somehow drawn to that blade.

“We are, selling blades, here in Genos.”

“Ah, so this is one of your goods, then?”

“Jagar, is famous, for iron blades. But, Sym blades, surpass them.”

Was that how people from Sym expressed competitiveness when they didn't let their emotions show?

Shumiral blinked his eyes, looking ever so slightly troubled.

“Many chefs, in Genos, use Sym blades.”

“Chefs...?” I questioned, finally seeing what he was getting at.

I had heard that there were no people who actually made a living as chefs here in the post town. That such folks only existed inside the stone walls.

“So is this perhaps a cooking knife?”

“That's right.”

Now that I thought about it, Shumiral's group had just come from the north. And the member of The Silver Vase who had visited the shop on our first day of business had come from the same direction, right?

Were they all coming back from the Genos castle town to the north, then?

“...Do all the chefs in the Genos castle town use Sym blades?”

“Not all, of them. But, many.”

“Would you mind letting me see that knife for a bit?”

With that, Shumiral broke out in an ever so slight smile.

“I would be happy, to let you see it, Asuta.”

Then, he held it out to me handle first.

What sort of blades chefs in the castle town used didn't really have anything to do with me. And since I was still just in training, I wasn't all that familiar with what made a knife good or bad.

But Shumiral had praised my old man's kitchen knife, then showed me this blade while speaking of the pride of his nation, so of course I was interested.

As I held my breath a bit, I pulled it free of its black leather sheath.

The blade itself was roughly rectangular in shape, and it had an edge sharpened from a single side.

It was around eight centimeters wide, and it was a bit thinner than your usual kitchen knife. It was also rounded upwards a bit at the tip, calling to mind the *usuba* vegetable knives from the Kansai region.

The silver length of the blade had a whirling design etched into it that was so subtle you wouldn't notice it without looking closely. It was so finely done that I couldn't even feel it when touching the blade. Thanks to that, it surely wouldn't have any effect on the cross section of the ingredients it cut, either.

“...It's a cooking knife meant for vegetables, isn't it?”

“That's right.”

It was single-edged and pretty thin, so of course it was.

But at any rate, it sure was a beautiful blade.

Plus, my fingers felt perfectly accustomed to the wooden grip, which closely resembled ebony.

“Please, try cutting, with it.”

“Huh? Is it alright to do that with something you’re selling?”

“If you do not, you will not know, how it cuts.”

Ironware was expensive anywhere in this world; that wasn’t just limited to Sym. Or at the very least, it seemed awful expensive compared to food. And so, I couldn’t exactly go buying a new cooking knife at the drop of a hat... But still, I did want to see how this beautiful blade cut.

“Okay, I’ll take you up on that just a bit...”

I went ahead and cut off some fresh tino leaves, stacked them, then diced them up nice and even.

Sure enough, I didn’t have any issues with how it cut, either.

I had at least tried out some of this world’s cooking knives a little in the Ruu family kitchen, but this was on a whole other level. To be honest, I’d say it was on the same level as my old man’s kitchen knife.

Of course, this was a dedicated knife for vegetables, so that certainly should be the case, but it hadn’t been at all for the Ruu house’s vegetable knife.

“...I agree. It really is a wonderful knife.”

Shumiral gave a nod, then held a small cloth in one hand while holding out his other towards me.

I placed the knife on an unused wooden plate, and held it for Shumiral so that the handle was facing him. Then, in a truly elegant motion, he started cleaning the blade.



“I still need to save up a whole lot more before I can consider buying a new cooking knife, but... How much is it?”

“20 white.”

That was roughly the same as the pot I had previously purchased.

I believe the price for a vegetable knife at the town blade shop was four white coins and five red... In other words, there was a fitting price attached to it for how high quality it was. And I thought that was only right.

“...If you, were to buy it, it would be, 18 coins.”

“Huh?”

“We will be, in Genos, for the blue month. If you wish, to buy it, let me know.”

“...Got it. Thank you,” I said with a smile and a nod.

Once again Shumiral came to the verge of smiling back... but he smoothly shifted back to his usual expression again.

“I’m hungry. And so, I will eat, a giba burger.”

“Right. Thanks for your business as always!”

Shumiral nodded, and moved to the other stall.

As she watched him leave with a look of suspicion in her eyes, Lala Ruu whispered to me, “What’s that about? Isn’t 18 white coins way too much for such a puny knife?”

“Yeah, but I’d been thinking I’d like a knife like that.”

“...Then why not buy it? You’ve made hundreds of coins by now, right?”

“That may be so, but around half of that goes to expenses.”

“I don’t see the issue. You’re earning like crazy every day, so if you don’t spend any, the weight of the coins will end up causing your floor to collapse.”

That was definitely an exaggeration, but if I kept on earning at this rate... I really may end up with enough to justify buying that knife.

Ah, no, it was still too early to start getting greedy. Each and every day was still like walking a tightrope, so I needed to make sure I kept a firm footing.

But I couldn't help thinking about it...

Still, when it comes to things that I want in this world, all I can think of is cooking tools.

What did Ai Fa want? After all, I had a hard time picturing her buying anything but everyday necessities. And I couldn't imagine her being any more frivolous with our surplus of money than me.

If I secretly bought her a hairpin or something, she probably really would beat me to a pulp.

The morning rush had passed and we hadn't been raided by the Suun clan, so I was able to spend the time before the sun hit its peak peacefully daydreaming away.

3

When Shumiral's group from The Silver Vase left, Sheera Ruu called out, "Asuta, there's just one giba burger left. Should I start heating up fresh tarapa?"

"Ah, yeah, please do. Set aside that one and put the samples out on a wooden plate, if you don't mind."

"Right."

"Lala Ruu, could I ask you to man the shop for a bit again?"

"Yeah."

With that I moved over to the giba burger stall, using this chance to get a first-hand look at Sheera and Vina Ruu's skills.

Apparently, they had already chopped up the tarapa by the time that The Silver Vase showed up. And now, Vina Ruu added firewood to the brazier in a practiced motion, while Sheera Ruu added the tarapa to the pot.

"...Asuta, there's still a good bit of tarapa left, so I think adding two may be too much."

"Ah, that's true. In that case, would just one be plenty?"

"That's what I thought, so I only chopped up the one," Sheera Ruu replied

with a smile.

“That being the case, we should halve the aria and fruit wine, right?”

“Yeah, please go ahead and do that.”

The tarapa sauce started simmering away.

And we were adding just a bit more myamuu than yesterday, so the aroma was a little stronger, too.

The thought was that maybe I could use that smell alone to draw in the people from the west who had been hanging about, and as if in response, a group was indeed approaching.

“Hey. I decided to come again today. And I even brought along friends, too.”

It was Yumi, the one girl out of that group of troublemakers from yesterday.

“Ah, thank you for tha—” I started to say, but was suddenly at a loss for words.

There were four people there behind Yumi, and all of them were young girls around her age. They all had ivory-white skin, and wore colorful tops and winding skirts that went down to their ankles, just like her. Was that just the standard style for girls about town in the west?

“Huh? This is tarapa, isn’t it? I smelled myamuu, but is this a different dish than yesterday?”

“Yes. The dish from yesterday is being sold at the neighboring stall. Currently we’re getting more ready for this stall, but once it’s ready, would you like to give it a sample?”

“Yeah! Let’s do that.”

She seemed pretty boorish yesterday, but now that she was all smiles, she was giving off a totally different impression. I thought she seemed like she was trying a little too hard to draw attention, but her expression itself looked totally innocent.

“Asuta, the tarapa seems to have heated,” Sheera Ruu quietly called out to me.

“Got it. Well then, all that leaves is the seasoning...” I said while reaching out, but then I stopped and thought. “...Actually, could you handle the final seasoning?”

“Huh?” Sheera Ruu questioned, her eyes going wide in surprise.

I got just close enough that I wasn’t being rude, then whispered, “Try feeling out the amount of rock salt and pico leaves to use by yourself. If I don’t think it’s enough then I’ll step in and add some more, and if it’s too much then we’ll adjust it by adding more tarapa.”

“...Right. Understood.”

She must have decided this was part of her work too, as there wasn’t a bit of hesitation in her eyes.

I gave Sheera Ruu a nod, then turned back towards our customers.

“Well then, would you like to start by sampling the dish from yesterday?”

“Ah, right. I already know how it tastes, but could you let the rest of them try it?”

With that, one of the girls who had been watching our exchange with a rather frightened look on her face interjected, “H-Hey, Yumi...”

“I’m telling you, it’s fine! I already explained enough, didn’t I? It’s totally delicious, so give it a try, even if you think I’m trying to trick you!”

“But...” “I mean...” the girls grumbled, wriggling their bodies.

It was just like when Dora had brought the oldtimers from the cloth and pot shops. But what was it that felt different about this?

Mulling it over, it hit me that the folks from the south and east were pretty much all older men far from home, so Tara and Yumi had been my only young female customers up till now. Maybe that was why I found it so hard to know how to handle this group of teenage girls standing in front of me.

I didn’t used to think that way, but maybe I had been influenced by my month and some change of simple living at the forest’s edge. Even if I didn’t feel like I was living a plain life, the people of the forest’s edge definitely were, and the women were no exception. And after all that time being surrounded by such

women in the kitchen, it felt awkward facing these girls from about town, with their supple movements and high-pitched voices.

But even still, they were customers. And so, I simply said, “If you would like to give it a try, then please head over that way,” motioning to the myamuu giba stall.

Then, I swiftly drew close to Sheera Ruu again.

“How’s it looking?”

“Alright... I think it’s ready for you to give a taste,” Sheera Ruu replied with a nervous look on her face.

I nodded back and scooped up some sauce with a wooden spoon.

There were no problems here.

She had to be naturally talented, to have recreated the flavor like this after just a few tastes. I had to imagine she was a real rarity among the people of the forest’s edge, who didn’t value cooking at all up until now.

“This is good. All right, please go ahead and heat up the patties.”

“...Right,” Sheera Ruu replied with a sigh of relief.

She was worrying way more than the other members of our group, so I’d have to make sure I rewarded her somehow eventually.

“Now then...” I said, facing back towards the customers.

Sure enough, the girls kept on wriggling, going, “But...” “I don’t wanna...”

I really did still have a ways to go, as I couldn’t stop myself from thinking, *No buts.*

Yumi, meanwhile, brushed at her long, dark brown hair while looking annoyed.

“Geez, you all have got no guts at all. Um... W-What was your name again?”

“Me? My name is Asuta.”

“Asuta, huh? That’s an interesting name. Hey, Asuta, go ahead and let me sample it one more time too. Maybe that will be enough to help them work up

the nerve.”

“Right. Thank you for your consideration,” I said with a smile, but Yumi frowned a bit in response.

“...Asuta, how old are you?”

“Huh? I’m 17 years old.”

“In that case, you’re one year older than me. Which means you don’t need to talk to me so stiffly.”

“Ah, no! I can’t be impolite to my customers! Now then... This way, please.”

Yumi clicked her tongue with a “Tch,” and sulked, but then she moved over to the myamuu giba stall.

The four girls followed along, but they all made sure to keep their distance.

“Huh? You put on a fire, Lala Ruu?”

“Hmm? I thought I should heat the meat back up. Should I not have?”

“No, that was a wonderful decision. Well then, please hold on just a moment.”

There was still plenty enough meat for samples sitting on the wooden plate.

When I went and added that back into the pot along with just a bit of marinade, the smell of myamuu and fruit wine filled the air.

“Well? Doesn’t it smell good?” Yumi questioned, turning towards the girls with a triumphant look on her face.

As for the girls, they were all gathered together, wiggling and squirming. They were definitely worried, but I didn’t sense that their fear was all that ingrained. At the very least, it wasn’t as bad as the cloth and pot sellers the first time that they came.

Whether it was how long they had lived in Genos, their gender, or their age... There was some primary factor at work here.

“Thank you for waiting. Now then, please go ahead.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Yumi replied, chucking the chunk of meat into her mouth

without a hint of hesitation. “Ah, it’s so good! Hey, which one’s tastier? This one, or that tarapa dish?”

“I believe that will vary from person to person, but I think the tarapa one will be more to the taste of most women.”

“In that case, I definitely have to try a sample! What about you all...? Are you not going to try it after all? You don’t think your skin will get all dark if you eat giba meat or anything, do you?”

Even so, the girls just kept on wriggling.

But then, another group suddenly approached the stall from behind them.

“Hey... Do we not have to pay coins for that?”

They were two young men with ivory-white skin. However, they were talking to Yumi rather than me.

“Huh? Yeah, that’s right. He said you can try this, then if you like it you can pay some coins to buy one.”

“Is that so...?” he replied, then timidly looked at me.

Naturally, I smiled back.

“Please, go ahead. And the dish at that stall is completely different, so if you’d like, feel free to try both and compare.”

“What should we do?” “What do you think?” they asked each other, now joining in the wriggling.

Just then, Sheera Ruu chimed in by saying, “Asuta, this meat is all heated up too.” In response, Yumi cheered “Hooray!” and ran over that way.

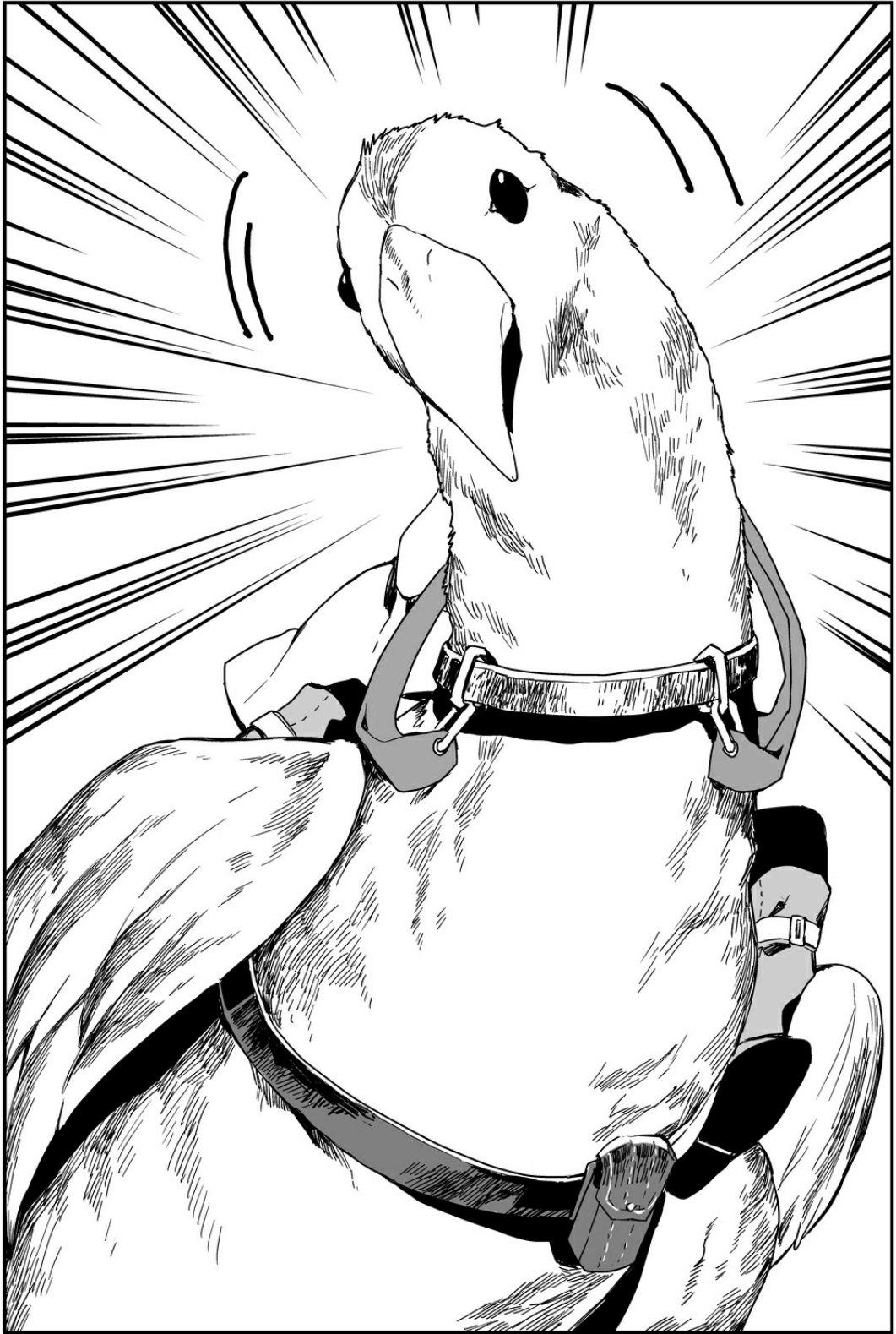
“Giba meat is delicious, you see. And I’m proud of both of these... Gah!”

“Wah!”

“Ack!”

Three male voices cried out at once, me included.

Suddenly, there was a giant totos bird’s long neck poking through between the two troubled youths.



“My apologies,” a voice devoid of emotion called out from up above.

The stall’s roof was blocking my view, but it would seem that had come from a rider from Sym seated atop the massive bird, wearing traveling attire.

“Hey! It’s forbidden to ride totos in town!” Yumi loudly screeched, only for the man to respond again with, “My apologies,” and get down to the ground.

His leather cloak and dark face had a bit of sand on them. He must have been a traveler who had come from the north.

At any rate, that traveler from Sym looked back and forth slowly between the sign on the stall and the samples.

“...Giba?”

“Yes, this is a meal made with giba meat. If you’d like, you can try one of these samples,” I replied without hesitation, holding out the wooden plate.

Apparently, the language of the west got through to him just fine, as he gave a single nod and grabbed a toothpick.

“That stall also serves giba. It uses tarapa, and is a bit of a unique dish.”

The traveler nodded again, then left the stall along with his totos.

A moment later, a deep, masculine voice sounded out from his destination.

“Whoa! Don’t go around the stalls with your totos! You need to hurry up and check it into a totos stable, you Sym jerk!”

Apparently, a customer from Jagar had been ordering a giba burger from that stall without me even noticing him.

The man from Sym responded, “My apologies,” again, but he still reached out towards the samples.

“Geez, all you damn folks from Sym are like this...” the customer from Jagar muttered in annoyance, coming my way while avoiding the totos. “Huh? What’s this? This couldn’t be another stall for giba dishes, could it?”

“Ah, it is. From today on, we’ll be running two stalls.”

“I thought I smelled some delicious myamuu in the air, and it was coming

from here, huh?! What, so this is a different dish, then?”

“That’s correct. If you’d like, you can try a sample.”

The man rudely barged forward, shoving the wriggling youths out of the way with his shoulders, and grabbed a toothpick.

One bite, and immediately he went, “Ooh!” and his eyes grew wide. “This is really darn tasty, too... Man, I didn’t even realize it and bought one from over there...”

“My apologies. If you’d like, I could exchange it for one of these dishes.”

“But I wanted to eat this too...” he said, his eyes cast downward and looking regretful, then his gaze suddenly shot up and fixed on me. “Alright, already! I’ll do it! One of these, too! You’re going to close up shop by the time the sun goes down anyway, right? In that case I’ll just spoil my dinner and eat more delicious food now! How many coins is it?”

“Ah, two red coins.”

“How cheap! That means I can get two for four coins, which is practically nothing,” he said with a satisfied smile, then slapped his coins down on the counter.

“Thank you! Please hold on just a moment!”

But then, a crude voice questioned, “What’s this, giba meat cooking?”

A group of three men with yellowish-brown skin were standing in front of the other stall. They had knives and hatchets hanging from their waists, and looked like real scoundrels.

“You really think you can sell that crap in Genos? If you want coins, then how about using that sexy face and body you’ve got there?”

In addition to their bladed weapons, they also had fruit wine containers dangling from their hands.

I started stepping forward without even thinking, but Lala Ruu grabbed me by the arm.

“Leave it be. What good would come of you going over? Just leave it to Vina.”

“No, but...”

“Women walking alone around town always have to deal with that sort of stuff. Honestly, even Sheera Ruu or I could drive off guys like that.”

“...They’re some real dumbasses. I doubt they’ve got what it takes to go and make an enemy of the people of the forest’s edge,” the customer from Jagar said while calmly chewing away at his giba burger. “Never mind them and just hurry up and get it made. Once I’m done eating, I’ve got to hurry back to work.”

“R-Right...” I replied, forcing myself to focus on adding the aria to the pot.

I couldn’t hear their conversation, but occasionally I would hear one of the men crudely proclaiming, “What’d you say?” or “Don’t mess with me!” or something.

By the time the meat was nice and cooked and I finished up the myamuu giba, those men were each holding a giba burger and walking away.

“See? Vina draws attention easily, so she’s used to stuff like that.”

As I breathed a sigh of admiration, the two youths who had been wriggling the whole time weakly chimed in, “Um... Can we try a sample...?”

“Yes! Of course!”

When I snuck a glance, I saw the girls were sampling the giba burgers. And Yumi was a step ahead of them and had already ordered, so she was happily chewing away at her food while chatting with Vina Ruu.

Soon, the youths went, “Whoa... This is good, isn’t it?” “It’s a little hard, but it doesn’t smell at all,” letting their impressions slip out in quiet voices.

They sure were shy ones.

“If you’d like, please go ahead and try out that stall, too.”

As I said that, a new customer from Sym arrived and silently slapped down his coins.

“T-Thank you! Please hold on just a moment!”

Things seemed strangely busy right now, for some reason.

As I thought that while gazing up at the sky, I saw that the sun had long since

hit its peak.

Apparently two hours had passed by without me noticing, and we were now in the back half of our fight.

Now that we were at this point, the finish line didn't seem all that far in the distance.

Once the young men and girls chose between the giba burgers and myamuu giba and made their purchases, that left both stalls with a bit over 20 left each.

"Ah, so this is that giba cooking they were talking about in the inn," a person from Jagar said, approaching with a group. At the same time, a similar number of customers from Sym silently drew nearer. It wasn't as intense as first thing in the morning, but in exchange, there pretty much wasn't a moment that there wasn't someone in front of the stalls.

And as if they had been awaiting this influx of customers, we started to steadily get some ivory-white skinned folks approaching too.

Naturally, not all of these people bought something. About half of them turned back without even trying a sample, and it wasn't at all uncommon for someone to pretty much flee after tasting one.

However, a great number of people also timidly placed an order.

"Hey, this is giba?" a member of a group of children called out.

They looked to be around five or six, even younger than Tara.

"That's right. Would you like to try a sample?" I asked, holding out the wooden plate, only for them to let out childishly light-hearted squeals as they scattered.

But eventually, they gathered again and nervously approached the stall.

"Samples are completely free. Would you like to try one?"

"But... if you eat giba, you grow horns, right?"

"And your skin gets all dark, doesn't it?"

"Hmm? I've been eating it for over a month now, but I still haven't grown any horns myself."

Then, I pointed towards Lala Ruu.

“And look, this girl here doesn’t have any either, right? So I’m sure it’s fine.”

With that, I got them to try the samples, to which they loudly proclaimed “Yummy!” and took off running down the street.

“...There’s no way kids that little would have coins to spend, you know.”

“It’s fine. Hearing that they liked it is more than enough to satisfy me.”

After that, our business gradually began to slow down again.

In the end, the myamuu giba wound up running out first. That happened roughly an hour after the sun hit its peak. When I had just two meals left, a group of three from Sym arrived.

“My deepest apologies! We only have two left. There are still a number of that tarapa dish left, though...”

The customers turned and expressionlessly whispered among themselves.

Then, one of them moved over to the giba burger stand, while the remaining two held out their coins.

“Thank you. Please hold on just a moment.”

We were finally at the finish line.

Now all that was left was to see if we could wrap things up smoothly.

When I handed the last myamuu giba to the customer, I left it to Lala Ruu to put out the fire and ran on over to the other stall.

“How many are left, Sheera Ruu?”

Just as Sheera Ruu was about to respond, a teen from the west who had tried a sample proclaimed, “A-Alright, I’ll have one!”

Sheera Ruu then smoothly put together the giba burger, while Vina Ruu accepted the customer’s money and handed over the finished dish.

At last, they had a break in their stream of customers, and the two smiled brightly at the same time.

“That was the last one.”

“We’re done...”

It had been a bit over three hours since the morning. There were about two hours left until we were set to close up shop, but even so, we had sold 120 meals and brought our fifth day of business to an end.

4

Once we put out the flames in the stalls, we swiftly started cleaning everything up.

As I was sweeping all the leftover vegetables from the cutting board and wooden plates into a bag, Vina Ruu shot me a brilliant smile.

“We really sold out after all, didn’t we?”

“That’s true. To be honest, it still doesn’t feel real to me.”

It might not have felt real, but we really did have a mountain of coins. Pretty much none of our customers used white coins, so the cloth bag we were using for coins sure was becoming hard to handle.

We had sold through all 120 meals we had prepared, meaning we had received 240 red coins.

It truly was an awe-inspiring number.

“At any rate, let’s go ahead and return the stalls. Ah... but it feels like it would probably be a good idea to visit the currency exchange first to deal with all these coins.”

Since I had over 200 coins, that made for about 1.5 kilos of weight. And so, it was best to exchange them for white coins as soon as possible.

I had heard that nobody would try to prey upon the people of the forest’s edge, but even so, I didn’t let my guard down as I walked down the stone highway.

Naturally, we drew attention since we were pushing carts along around when things generally got their busiest, but since it was the fifth day, I had gotten used to it.

“Hey, you’ve closed up shop? That’s the longest you’ve gone yet.”

“I’ll be stopping by again tomorrow, alright?”

Those warm calls that came our way were all from folks from Jagar.

However, there were also occasionally people from Sym who gave us a slight bow.

“Ah, Dora, are you feeling alright? Once we return this, we’ll be coming back this way.”

“Oh, good work today. I’m fine... I’m not feeling ill or anything like that.”

Dora was seated atop his usual cloth with his lined-up vegetables, but his face really did look a bit pale, and his smile was a touch weaker than usual.

I was worried about him, but for now, we needed to exchange these coins and return the carts.

The currency exchange was located right between the areas for the stalls and the inns. It was a sturdy building, and was protected by guards. And I called it a currency exchange, but apparently it primarily served as a loan office.

They didn’t earn a commission from just exchanging money, but it also wasn’t like they were in the loan business merely as a hobby or out of good will. No, apparently they were entrusted with that job by the lord of Genos, to assure that money could flow smoothly in the post town.

I couldn’t help but wonder if they had any strong feelings about how my business was increasing day after day. But at any rate, the middle-aged guy there showed no expression on his face as he went about exchanging my 200 red coins for 20 white ones.

We returned the carts to The Kimyuus’s Tail, temporarily had them hold onto our belongings, got glared at by Milano Mas, and then finally U-turned back towards the stalls.

“You know, I just noticed... That Kamyua Yoshu man didn’t show up today, did he...?”

“Ah, now that you mention it... It was so busy that I didn’t even notice.”

Neither Kamyua Yoshu nor the Suun clan had shown their faces. There weren't any crazy incidents or anything, either. And we had gone and sold through all 120 meals we had prepared. It really was an ideal, peaceful day.

As we walked through the bustling streets of the post town, Vina Ruu seductively shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, not seeing him is all well and good on the face of it... But when you don't see him, you can't help but wonder if he's plotting something somewhere out of sight..."

"Oh, do you hate Kamyua then, Vina Ruu?"

"I don't like people whose feelings I can't read... That's why I love you so much, Asuta..."

Was I really that easy to read?

But at any rate, we had to focus on heading to Dora's shop for now.

"Hey there. Today sure is bustling, huh?" Dora greeted me and the three girls, somehow looking a little weak. And I didn't see Tara around anywhere, either.

"You don't look like you're feeling too well. It... really isn't some sort of illness?"

"Yeah, as if I'd go and catch a cold," he said with a firm shake of his head. "The truth is... This morning, a giba got caught in one of our pitfalls."

"Huh?"

"We have all sorts of traps around our fields so that the giba won't get at our vegetables. But this morning, they still got us pretty bad... But one of them was dumb enough to fall into our pitfall."

"...I see."

"Yeah. And since we set it up, we had to finish it off. And so we all stabbed at it with grigee spears from the top of the hole, but... On days like this, I just don't feel like eating meat. Those horrifying sounds it was making are burned into my ears... And just remembering causes me to tremble."

With that, his rotund body really did start quaking.

“The hunters of the forest’s edge really are amazing. The idea of running into a giba in the forest is like a nightmare. I’m sure my knees would give out just from seeing one... There’s no way I could fight a monster like that.”

“I couldn’t either. The hunters seriously have my respect.”

Would Ai Fa return home safely again today? I really wanted to hurry on back and see her doing just fine.

“Still, haven’t there been a lot of giba for the last month and a bit? My place is still fine, but I’ve heard the folks closer to the forest’s edge have suffered so much damage they feel like they’re hanging on by a thread. Apparently they’ve even torn up and eaten ari about to be harvested all the way down to the roots.”

As he said that, he shook his head and looked dejected.

“Somehow, it feels like the losses are getting worse year by year. Is it going to be like my grandfather’s time again, when they’d come flowing from the forest day in and day out...?”

“It’ll be alright, I think. But they really do seem to be on the rise, don’t they?”

Or perhaps it was the number of hunters of the forest’s edge not doing their duty that was growing. But the truth remained a mystery.

“Apparently back before the people of the forest’s edge came around, we farmers used to get together and play at hunting giba. And from what I heard, the giba killed a whole lot of people in the process... My grandfather himself got stabbed in one of his legs and had to use a cane for the rest of his life. I hate it... I could never do something like hunting giba.”

“Dora...”

“Ah, sorry. The people of the forest’s edge put their lives on the line to hunt giba, so this isn’t the kind of thing I should be grumbling to you about. From tomorrow on, I’ll start coming again to have some of your delicious cooking.”

“Right. And I’m glad to have you as a customer.”

Had Tara not opened up to us because this was what her father had been worried about?

Even if he had acted bright and friendly when talking about it, it wasn't something the people of the forest's edge could just turn a blind eye towards.

Just how many giba are those guys from the Suun clan even hunting, anyway? I can't imagine they're not hunting any at all... But the folks from the main house are coming to the post town in the middle of the day just to drink and eat snacks.

The Suun clan was supposed to be on the same scale as the Ruu, so naturally it would have a huge effect if they weren't carrying out their duty as hunters.

"...Don't look so serious there, Asuta. Now then, how much will you be buying today?" Dora asked. He was trying to be overly considerate, so I went ahead and tried to shift gears too.

After all, all I could do for now was try my hardest to run a successful business.

"Sorry. Well then, I'll take two tarapa and 30 aria... And could I get 150 poitan, too?"

"So you've finally hit 150 poitan, have you?! Well then, does that mean you'll be preparing that many meals for tomorrow?"

"That's right. I figure that's probably going to be the limit for what we can make with four people."

The prep work for the giba burgers took time, so the plan was to instead increase the number of myamuu giba up to 90. Then we would use the next five days to see if we could keep preparing that many each day without putting too much strain on ourselves.

"Also, the Fa house's stockpile of meat is reaching its limits," I said to Vina Ruu as I counted poitan. "I'd like to start getting some meat from the Ruu house from tomorrow on, so could I ask you to convey that to Donda and Mia Lea Ruu?"

"Yeah, got it..."

We had already discussed that matter, but I was still racking my brains over what to do about the price.

The Ruu clan had an excess of meat, so Mia Lea Ruu had simply told me, “We don’t need any payment. Take as much as you want.” But we still didn’t know how long I’d be running this business for, so I couldn’t go and essentially just take their meat for free forever. So ultimately, I suggested that I should at least pay for the work of bloodletting and dissecting, which they accepted.

It was an amusing negotiation in which the buyer was trying to raise the price while the sellers were attempting to lower it, but when we finally settled things, we decided on an equivalent amount to that giba’s horns and tusks. That meant 12 red coins for a large giba, and eight for a small.

I still felt that was way too cheap, so someday I’d have to raise it to a fairer price.

“Well then, I’ll be counting on you from the day after tomorrow onwards. Sorry that it’s going to be so much to carry.”

The plan was to have Vina Ruu carry the meat supply for the next day to the Fa house in the morning. Even so, she shot me back a bright smile as I finished counting the poitan.

“If I’m just taking it from one house to another it’ll be no problem at all, since I can use a pulling board. And besides, Lala and Sheera Ruu will be handling much tougher work while I’m just strolling along...”

“Yeah, that’s right. You should have to strain yourself a bit too, Vina.”

They may not talk much during work, but Vina and Lala Ruu really did seem to get along well. And Sheera Ruu was standing there right beside them, a casual smile on her face.

Yes, everyone was wearing satisfied grins. It was clear that those smiles came from the sense of fulfillment from having put in a hard day’s work.

Or at the very least, that was how I was feeling.

5

“Well then, see you again tomorrow,” I said to Vina Ruu as she set down the pot in front of the Fa house.

The cleanup and shopping had taken some time, but even so, there were still four hours left till sunset. And in that case, I could afford to take some time with my preparations.

But since we're going and preparing 150 meals, I'm sure we'll be in the post town for the full time from tomorrow on. That means I've got to set things up so I can efficiently handle everything with that in mind.

As that thought ran through my mind, I went to open the door.

To my surprise, though, it was bolted.

"Huh? Ai Fa, are you back already?" I called out as I knocked on the door.

After what felt like an eternity of silence, I finally heard Ai Fa respond, "Hold on a moment."

And yet, the door still wasn't opening. In the end, Ai Fa's "moment" ended up being roughly 30 seconds.

But eventually, I heard the scraping sound of the bolt coming loose, and then the door creaking open.

And in that instant, my breath caught in my throat.

"What happened, Ai Fa?!"

I had no idea what could have occurred. But Ai Fa was clearly frowning deeper than I had ever seen her do before, her slender face was dripping with anguished, cold sweat, and her eyes had the look of a wounded animal about them.

"Not so loud... Hurry up and get inside," Ai Fa said, quietly disappearing in the shadow of the door.

At any rate, I went ahead and grabbed the pot packed with luggage and stepped into the house.

Ai Fa was crouched behind the door, still wearing her fur cloak and cradling her own left arm.

"...Bolt the door."

I hurriedly did as I was told, then leaned over Ai Fa.

“What’s wrong? Does your arm hurt? You weren’t attacked by the Suun clan, were you?”

From what I could see, she didn’t seem to have any external injuries. However, I hadn’t seen her make such a clearly pained face since back when she was attacked by the giant madarama snake.

“As if those fools would get the better of me... My arm bone just shifted while hunting,” Ai Fa wrung out.

Her bone... shifted?

Did she mean it was dislocated?

“W-Where in your arm? It’s your left arm, right? Is it your shoulder? Or your elbow?”

“I told you to quiet down... But it’s my left elbow. I already popped the bone back into place, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Y-You say that, but aren’t you supposed to fix it in place after you dislocate a bone? Umm, is there anything we can use as a splint...?”

With that, Ai Fa smacked her head into my chest.

I suppose that was the only way she could object, since both her arms were busy.

“Nothing will be solved by you making a fuss... I know how to handle this, so you just need to lend me your aid.”

“G-Got it. What do you want me to do?”

“...First, remove my footwear.”

I swiftly did as she asked.

Just how much did a dislocated elbow hurt? And on top of that, she had popped it back in herself... Even if I knew how to do that, I could never manage it.

“I-I took them off.”

“Alright... Now we move...”

Ai Fa slowly rose to her feet, biting her lip all the while.

She suddenly wobbled, and so I supported her shoulders as gently as I could with both hands.

Man... I never imagined Ai Fa actually getting injured...

Even through her thick cloak, I could still feel the high temperature Ai Fa was giving off.

“...Take off my hunting attire.”

“Right.”

I untied the leather straps holding the cloak in place, laid it down on the floor, and helped Ai Fa squat down by the wall.

“...There should still be one strip of cloth I haven’t used. Bring that here.”

Naturally, I obediently followed her orders to the letter.

For the next step, I placed a wooden splint against her forearm, tore off thin strip of cloth and wrapped it all around that, and then hung it from her neck to fix her left arm in place. It was pretty much the same treatment method from back in my old world.

“That’s fine... Now then, there are romu leaves inside my cloak, so take those out.”

There were plenty of hidden pockets sewn into the inside of her cloak. And inside of one of them were several of what looked like nearly pitch-black maple leaves.

“It’s a medicinal herb, for reducing fever... Use a wooden spoon to pulverize that alongside just a bit of water... One leaf will be plenty...”

As she leaned up against the wall, Ai Fa’s voice steadily grew weaker. It honestly felt more like her temperature was on the rise than her having trouble dealing with the sharp pain.

“I mashed it. Do you drink this, then?” I asked, approaching Ai Fa and bringing the spoon up to her mouth.

She gulped down the now paste-like black leaf, grimacing like it was seriously

gross.

“Alright... Now I’ll rest for a while. Wake me up for dinner.”

“What sort of food do you want to eat? We have gigo, so should I go and make the poitan into a soup too?”

“You should bake the poitan...” Ai Fa replied, pouting ever so slightly.

When I stared at her pained face, it felt like my heart was being crushed.

“Then how about the same menu as Granny Jiba? And if it’s too hard to eat, you can just add the hamburger and poitan to the soup.”

“...Yesterday was hamburgers, so is it really alright?”

“You don’t need to hold back at times like this, you dummy.”

As I said that, I soaked the leftover scrap of cloth in the water jug then firmly wrung it out so I could use it to wipe the sweat from Ai Fa’s face.

“Ah, that feels good,” she muttered, gently closing her eyes. “Having you here is such a help, Asuta... I suffered a similar injury around a year back, and it was a great struggle just to wrap my bandages...”

“...I’m just glad you didn’t get injured any worse.”

“Ah, that’s true. Injuries like this will heal in just a few days... So in that time, I’ll be relying on you a bit.”

“You can count on me as much as you need.”

I washed off the cloth using water I had ladled up, then placed it on her forehead. The water was naturally room temperature, but I still figured it was better than doing nothing.

“Well then, I’m sleeping... You carry out your own work.”

“Got it. If you need anything, then call for me right away, alright?” I replied, despite knowing that I wouldn’t let Ai Fa out of my sight.

A dislocation was no joking matter, but I really was glad she hadn’t suffered something she couldn’t recover from.

Just what would happen to me if I lost Ai Fa now? I couldn’t ever endure that

reality, much less figure out how my day to day life would go.

Just how much resolve did the women of the forest's edge need to see their men off to the forest each and every day?

"Don't worry... I'll be able to move without any issues from tomorrow on... There's no need to fear the Suun clan..." Ai Fa muttered out of nowhere.

I had been heading towards the entrance to clean up my luggage, but with that I made a U-turn and leaned in over Ai Fa.

"I know. So you just take it easy and get your rest. Try to get better, even just a bit sooner, since I'm making you delicious food."

With her eyes still closed, Ai Fa broke out in a slight smile.

"I want to eat hamburgers soon, Asuta..."

I gave a nod, wrapped both my arms around Ai Fa's burning cheeks, then stood up to start preparing for dinner and the next day.

Intermission: Morning for the Two of Them

When I awoke, I opened my eyes and saw Ai Fa's peaceful, sleeping face right in front of me. In fact, we were so ridiculously close that "right in front of me" might not even cover it, causing my heart to skip a beat.

Her pale little lips were open, and I could hear her soundly breathing away in her sleep. Her golden eyelashes looked incredibly long, and her hair fell over her forehead and cheek, looking every bit as beautiful as jewelry.

What a truly serene sleeping face. It was enough to make her pained look from yesterday seem like a hallucination.

It was an innocent sleeping face that made her look far younger than she really was, like a defenseless baby... But she was way too close. Our noses were probably just a hand-width apart.

After all, Ai Fa was resting her head on my left shoulder as she slept away.

Though I felt a bit of a pleasant feeling I couldn't quite put into words, I was also feeling seriously flustered and confused.

Ai Fa was sleeping on her side, with the right part of her body facing downwards. I had been sleeping faced upwards, and she was snuggled right up against me.

The second I realized that, I could feel the left side of my body where Ai Fa was touching awash in heat.

However, my left arm alone was numb. The blood flow must have been pretty obstructed, there.

...First off, I needed to calm myself.

My heart may have started pounding away like a jackhammer, but I needed to deal with this calmly and carefully.

I hurriedly racked my memories, trying to figure out just how we had fallen asleep last night.

Yesterday, Ai Fa had suffered a dislocated left elbow. And so, she had slept all the way till dinner.

Perhaps because the fever reducing herb was working, Ai Fa was out of it the whole time we were eating, looking like she would fall face first into her bowl if I just left her be.

But at any rate, since there weren't any dinner tables around, it wasn't possible to eat with just one arm. And so, I had spent around thirty minutes steadily helping her eat her soup, hamburger, and baked poitan.

Afterwards, Ai Fa just sat there in a daze slumped up against the wall. Her fever had lowered significantly and she no longer seemed to be in terrible pain, but she was definitely still out of it.

It was possible that romu leaf herb also had a sedative effect. After all, normally Ai Fa had such a tense look on her face, but now she appeared way more childish and dependent.

While feeling pained by seeing her so different than normal, I had set about preparing the food. I needed to chop up enough meat for 90 myamuu giba, while also cooking the tarapa sauce at the same time.

And all the while, Ai Fa kept on silently alternating between being awake and asleep.

Then, around when I finished with those preparations, Ai Fa started breaking out in a fever again.

I had her drink down the anti-fever herb once more, but she kept on suffering. And I wiped off her sweat and put a wet cloth on her head countless times, but all that did was give her temporary peace of mind.

"Never mind that... Just sit beside me for a bit..."

"Beside you?" I parroted, not getting what she meant, only for her to lean on my shoulder.

Her body was incredibly hot, with her forehead in particular feeling like it was on fire.

"This is fine... Once this fever passes, I'll get my strength back..."

Ai Fa was trembling ever so slightly.

Her body and forehead were burning up, but the fingers that grabbed my chest were like ice.

When I held those freezing fingers tight, Ai Fa stared straight at me with feverish eyes.

“If you don’t find this unpleasant, just let me stay like this for a bit...”

“It’s not unpleasant, and even if it was, that wouldn’t matter now at all.”

Then, I had watched Ai Fa’s pained face until the animal fat candle burned out. And even after that, I kept on watching by the light of the moon.

Finally, the pain disappeared from her face, and I could hear her breathing peacefully in her sleep.

I could remember all the way up until I thought *thank goodness* and felt relieved.

I guess that meant I must have just fallen asleep after that.

Right now, there was a bit of sunlight faintly shining in through the window.

From the level of brightness, I would say I hadn’t seriously overslept or anything.

And I could see the wall of the house on the other side of Ai Fa. We must have slumped down to the floor after having fallen asleep leaning up against the wall. I just felt glad that my body had acted as a cushion, so her left arm probably didn’t suffer any damage.

That was what was most important, but still, this position was seriously problematic.

But with that said, if I moved too roughly I could probably agitate her injury, so I had no choice but to wake her up first.

“Ai Fa, it’s morning... Could you wake up for a second?”

In response, Ai Fa gave a disgruntled sounding “Ugh.”

It occurred to me that it was exceptionally rare for me to wake up before her. And if she were her normal self, she would have opened her eyes the second I

said anything.

Was that why I could feel my heart beating so noisily? After all, Ai Fa's childishly peevish sleeping face was so adorable that it just wasn't fair.

"You can go back to sleep right away, but for now I just need you up for a second. I can't move like this."

"So noisy..." Ai Fa quietly muttered, grinding her head up against me.

Ugh, what the heck? I'd finally gotten nice and calmed down, but now I was getting all flustered again.

"M'm th' clan head... Don' get cheeky with me..."

She was totally still half asleep. But still, I found that just as rare of a sight as Darmu Ruu smiling.

However, I couldn't just keep enjoying that sight forever.

"Honored clan head, it's time for morning work. I must clean up after last night's dinner, so could I request that you temporarily awaken?"

"Ugh..." she cutely muttered again, and then her eyelids sluggishly lifted.

Her blue eyes stared straight at me from up super close, not looking especially focused.

"Asuta, is it...?"

"Yes. It is your clan member, Asuta."

"Ah, Asuta..." she repeated for some reason, then broke out in a smile.

Yes, Ai Fa was smiling wide.

And as she grinned innocently away, her eyelids started to droop shut again.

"It was Asuta..."

"Hey, no! It's morning! It's morning, clan head!"

With that, Ai Fa's eyes suddenly shot open like always.

As I breathed a sigh of relief, Ai Fa's now focused eyes stared at me, looking confused.

“...Why are you clinging to me, Asuta?”

“Hey, no matter how you look at it, you’re the one clinging to me... It seems that we carelessly fell asleep like this last night.”

“...Is that so? I don’t remember,” Ai Fa said, suddenly shutting her eyes.

“Well, thanks to that, your fever seems to have gone down...”

Then, I heard an adorable snore from Ai Fa.

“Hey, please don’t go back to sleep! There’s work! I’ve got to do my work!”

I may have felt relieved to see that she didn’t seem pained at all, but I still couldn’t help but yell.

Ai Fa’s eyes opened for the third time, and she shot me a disgruntled look.

“...It’s morning already?”

“Considering how bright it is, I’d say so.”

“I see. It seems taking the romu leaf really does have a strange effect on my body. I’d like to stay like this and rest for a bit longer,” Ai Fa responded, rubbing her head up against my chest again.

While I sat there at a loss, Ai Fa slowly sat up.

“We can’t do that though, can we? I’ve imposed greatly on you, Asuta.”

“No... I’m just glad to see you’re feeling better.”

As I grumbled in my head that these few minutes were the roughest part of all, I steadily sat up too.

And as Ai Fa sat cross legged on the floor, she stretched out just her right arm.

“My fever has come down, and the pain has dissipated a good bit. Well then, shall we start on morning work?”

“Huh? No, you just go ahead and rest. I’ll take care of washing everything.”

“What are you saying? Just what would you do if you encountered a member of the Suun clan?”

“No matter how despicable they may be, there’s no way they’d go on the attack first thing in the morning, right?! In a way, this is the time when the most

eyes are out and about, after all... But more importantly than all that, you're injured."

"Hmm? You couldn't possibly be thinking those fools would get the better of me just because I can't use my left arm, are you?" Ai Fa said with a disappointed looking pout. "Even if all three sons of the main Suun house came at me at once, I'd have no trouble managing them with just my right arm... I'd have no choice but to run if we were talking about the eldest son of the Ruu house, though."

Were the people of the forest's edge really that skilled at reading how strong people were?

And wait... Was Ai Fa saying she was confident she could even beat Jiza Ruu if she wasn't injured?

With that, the thing Ludo Ruu had said about only Donda Ruu being able to take down Kamyua Yoshu came to mind.

"...At any rate, you're not going to be washing anything with your arm like that, right? If anything happens I'll run away as fast as I can, so just go ahead and rest up."

"Hmm... Well, I don't want to walk openly around the settlement too much looking like this. I suppose I can leave just the washing to you," Ai Fa proclaimed, still looking a bit peeved. "I'll take care of the work around the house in the meantime. Just make sure you keep your guard up, alright?"

"Yeah. But you really should just be resting, right? It would be bad if you broke out in a fever again."

"I'm telling you, I'm fine. I can't feel any unusual pain from the bone, and my limbs are just fine. Considering all that, I'll heal faster just by working like normal."

Then, her gaze became very gentle as she looked my way.

"And also, I can feel that last night's food has done its job and properly become part of my flesh and blood. Plus, my fever has come down much quicker than when I was similarly injured a year ago. That's all thanks to you, Asuta."

“...It makes me very happy to hear that,” I said, smiling at last.

I could see Ai Fa’s eyes smiling, too.

“Well then, let’s get to work, Asuta.”



Naturally, I didn’t suffer any attacks by the Suun clan on my way to the washing place.

As long as they hadn’t lost their reason to alcohol, the Suun clan shouldn’t be able to carry out their wrongdoing in the open, so honestly there was no need to be this on-guard so early in the morning.

However, I had already seen Mida and Tei Suun in person.

It was very possible that they weren’t the types to get drunk and run wild. But on the other hand, they were just plain creepy and I had no idea what they may do.

It was a mystery just how much Mida Suun understood the orders of his clan head, and what Tei Suun was thinking was even harder to say.

Thanks to that, I felt the need to stay on guard at all hours of the day.

“Huh? Why are you wearing that?”

When I returned from my washing, I found Ai Fa waiting for me there in her hunter’s attire.

It went without saying that meant she had on her cloak, and even her blades dangling from her waist to complete the outfit.



“What do you mean? I’ve finished the work around the house, so next up is gathering firewood and pico leaves, right?”

“No, but you should be resting at least for today, right? I’d be worried about you entering the forest like that.”

As I replied, I set the washed pot on the stove, scooped in two ladles full of water, and threw in some firewood. After all, I needed to bake the poitan before I headed for the outskirts of the forest.

Then, I hung the clothing that was also freshly washed from the wall. By this point, my single T-shirt and white towel had seen quite a bit of use.

Ai Fa stood imposingly in the center of the room, her eyes following me as I moved all around. Then, she said in a disgruntled tone, “Such concern is unnecessary. Shirking work for even one day just means the next day’s work will be all the harder. Furthermore, don’t the pico leaves seem like they’re going bad quicker since you started working in the post town?”

I had noticed that, of course.

Pico leaves were a spice that helped preserve meat by sucking up moisture. By placing the cuts of meat and patties for sale in the pico leaves the day before, they seemed to suck up even more moisture, perhaps because more surface area was exposed that way as opposed to just storing it in chunks.

“There may be a need to replace the pico leaves before even a month has passed. In that case, it’s important to gather them with time to spare, isn’t it?”

“Hmm, that may be so, but still...”

“And also, I sweated far too much yesterday. I’ll continue to feel disgusting until I’m able to bathe,” Ai Fa said, a wrinkle forming at the top of her nose. “By wearing my hunter’s attire like this, I can hide the fact that I am injured. There’s nothing to worry about.”

When the worry on my face still didn’t disappear, though, the expression on Ai Fa’s face shifted.

“Asuta, I know full well that you’re worrying about me. But that really is unnecessary. I’m simply earnestly following what my own body is telling me...

Trust in my judgment.”

“...Got it.”

There was more than enough strength and calm in Ai Fa’s eyes to be worthy of my trust.

And I had to believe that with her strong pride as a hunter, she wouldn’t do something reckless that would delay her recovery.

At any rate, after I finished up baking the poitan for the shop and for dinner, I grabbed the bags for the firewood and pico leaves and we headed out into the outskirts of the woods.

It was a perfectly normal morning sight. And yet, Ai Fa shifted her cloak ever so slightly so the left half of her body was completely hidden, and her long golden hair ran down the side of her neck. Normally it was done up in a complex manner and hung above her neck, but today her hairstyle sort of reminded me of Vina Ruu.

“Ai Fa, that hairstyle feels pretty fresh. Was it too hard to do up your hair like normal with just one hand?”

“Yes, that was the one thing that proved difficult.”

“Well, it’s fine every now and again, right? And it suits you pretty well.”

Natural beauties sure have it nice, I added in my head.

As we walked down the yellow trodden path, Ai Fa let out a dissatisfied, “Hmph. Honestly, I would prefer to cut my hair short so it doesn’t get in the way. I wish that custom in particular would die out already.”

The custom she was referring to stated that women must not cut their hair until they’re married.

Was it really possible this beautiful hair would be lopped right off in the future?

At any rate, though, we soon arrived at the Lanto River, which gently flowed at the edge of the forest. The riverside was rocky at this point, but just a little bit further up it was lush with green, making it the perfect place for picking pico leaves.

However, the custom of the Fa clan was to cleanse our bodies in the river before doing so.

“Are you really going to be alright? Don’t get washed away by the river, alright?”

“So fussy,” Ai Fa muttered, as she handed me her necklace and cloak.

Then, she grabbed a cloth to wipe herself down with and a change of clothes from within the cloak she had tossed onto me.

“Ah, right. You didn’t come along to wash stuff.”

Normally she would change first thing in the morning, washing her dirty clothing along with everything else.

“Can you wash yourself with just one arm...? Well, with that said, I guess it’s not like I can help wash you or anything either.”

“If you understand that much, then don’t go bringing it up,” Ai Fa said, her eyes narrowing and glaring at me a bit, then she disappeared into the shadow of a large rock. It was the same as always.

Soon enough, it would be 40 days since I started living with Ai Fa. It was on that very first morning that we were attacked by a giant madarama snake and a giba.

We may not have faced such extreme misfortune since then, but I still prayed that no trouble would choose this morning to visit, when Ai Fa was hindered like this.

At any rate, I leaned my back up against the rock and kept an eye on the forest, only to hear, “Asuta.”

“Huh? What is it?”

“...It’s been more than a month since you came to live in the Fa house.”

I found it a bit amusing somehow that Ai Fa just happened to be thinking the same sort of thing.

“That’s true. It’ll be 40 days real soon... I think. But it also feels crazy that it’s only been that long.”

“Hmm... Today’s the second day of the blue month, isn’t it?”

It was rare to hear such things coming from Ai Fa. I knew she was aware of the calendar for the sake of keeping track of giba movement cycles, but it didn’t come up much in day to day life, so I still hadn’t grasped it all that well.

“Ah, in that case, it’ll be 13 more days till Kamyua sets out for the eastern kingdom, huh? So, what’s this about the blue month?”

“No, it’s nothing all that important...”

“Your birthday isn’t approaching or something, is it?”

“I was born in the red month.”

Just when would that be?

Actually, that question made me realize I had lost my own birthday.

By counting backwards I figured out how many days from now it was, but the Gregorian calendar wouldn’t apply to this world anyway. In this world they had a thirteenth month every three years, so there wouldn’t be any point in even trying to pin down my birthday.

But at any rate, back in my old world I was a second year in high school who had just turned 17. About a half a month after my birthday, that bizarre incident had occurred.

In that case... maybe it would be nice to make the day I appeared in this world into my second birthday.

Will I still be here in this world a year or two down the line, though?

Or would I suddenly be yanked back into my old world and forced to face my true fate?

Or maybe I’d be thrown into a different world entirely? No, that at least was one fate I was firmly opposed to.

Losing my entire life I had built up... I didn’t think I was tough enough to face something like that twice.

As that thought ran through my mind, I heard “Asuta” again. “Come over this way a bit.”

“Huh? Are you done bathing?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re definitely properly dressed, right?”

“...What in the world are you thinking?” Ai Fa questioned, her voice full of anger, so I swiftly did as she said and circled around the rock.

Ai Fa was seated cross legged beside the river, shooting me a bit of a scary glare.

Naturally, she was fully dressed, and she had even perfectly dealt with her left arm. However, her head was tilted to the right, her long, sopping-wet hair dangling down towards the ground and dripping.

“It’s quite difficult to dry my hair with just one hand,” Ai Fa said, thrusting the cloth at me with an angry look on her face.

“I see,” I replied, then got down on one knee on the rocks and followed along with my beloved benefactor’s demand. Even when it was just something like this, I felt glad to be of use to Ai Fa.

“...Long hair really is nothing but an annoyance,” Ai Fa muttered with a firm frown.

“Come on, don’t say that. I mean, you’ve got such beautiful hair.”

“Hmph. Hair that reflects too much light is just a nuisance when hunting. If only I had black hair like my father Gil—” Ai Fa started, then just unnaturally stopped.

“What is it?” I asked.

She just replied, “It’s nothing,” and averted her eyes. “I just recalled having a conversation like this with Granny Jiba and Rimee Ruu a long time ago.”

“Oh, really?”

Now that she mentioned them, it felt like we hadn’t been keeping very close contact with Granny Jiba and Rimee Ruu lately. Maybe this was just how things normally were, but it made me nostalgic for back when we were staying at the Ruu settlement.

“...Now here’s an idea. Hey, Ai Fa, there’s no way you could hunt with your body like that, right?”

“Of course. I’ll need to rest for between 10 days and half a month.”

“In that case, how about we ask to stay at the Ruu settlement during the day for now?”

Ai Fa shot me a dubious look as I kept on wiping her hair.

“Why? There’s no reason to do such a thing.”

“I mean, you’re just going to be sitting around home resting anyway, right? Plus there’s the matter of the Suun clan...”

“They have no idea that I’m injured.”

“There’s a chance they could try something even if they don’t know, right?”

“If that time comes, then I’ll just turn things around on them. Since I can’t afford to hold back right now, it’ll actually be more dangerous for those fools from the Suun clan.”

“No, but...”

“Asuta, it’s wrong for us to rely on the Ruu clan when we’re not even under them,” Ai Fa stated, an intense glare shooting my way from between her damp bangs. “We’re just borrowing the help of the Ruu women for an appropriate payment. That’s all there is to it, but it’s not like we have some sort of special relationship.”

“But Rimee Ruu and Granny Jiba are important to you, aren’t they? I was just thinking this would be a good chance for you to really take your time and talk with them.”

With that, the look in Ai Fa’s eyes softened a bit.

Then, her good hand gave me a light jab in the chest.

“Thanks to you, I was able to reforge my bonds with Rimee Ruu and Granny Jiba. There isn’t anything more I wish for... Even if we’re not able to talk, my heart is with the two of them.”

“Right.”

“But that’s unrelated to why I believe I shouldn’t rely on the Ruu clan. I refused their offer to marry into their clan, and you also turned down a request to change clans.”

I was at a loss as to what to say, as I understood what she was getting at.

Even so, I thought that we should be trying to have the best relationship we can with the Ruu clan... but Reina Ruu insisted it was dangerous for me to stay with the Fa clan. Perhaps because of that, it would be a significant blow to Ai Fa’s pride to rely on them while she was injured.

“Got it, I take back what I said. My thinking there was too short-sighted.”

“You’re short-sighted quite often.”

“Hey...”

“In fact, I would say the times when you’ve been otherwise have been few indeed.”

“Hey! The truth can hurt sometimes, you know?”

“It was a joke. Don’t get so angry,” Ai Fa said with a calm and composed expression.

Then, she gave me one more jab in the chest.

“You’re always saying things I don’t quite understand, but it’s not as if that’s always unpleasant. I’ll just give you a beating when it is, so feel free to say anything that comes to mind from here on out.”

“I think I might become untalkative because I don’t want any beatings...” I joked.

But Ai Fa firmly replied, “No. Always speak your mind. Don’t hide your thoughts and feelings from me.”

“Then you’ll do the same...?” I shot back.

Ai Fa pouted just a bit, then answered, “...I intend to do my best.”

I went ahead and gave Ai Fa a pat on the head, a strange feeling swirling in my chest all the while.

“Alright, I think your hair should be just about good.”

“Right,” she replied, then began skillfully tying her long hair up again using just her right hand and mouth to manipulate the leather strap. “The biggest trouble currently from the Suun clan isn’t the eldest or middle brother, but the youngest one, right? In that case, aren’t you in a far more dangerous position than me, Asuta?”

“Yeah. And that’s why I intend to stay on guard each and every day.”

“Hmm... How about if I accompany you to town from today on?”

“Huh?”

“As long as I need to rest my body, there’s no great difference between being at home or in town. And wouldn’t it put both of us better at ease to be able to keep an eye on the other?”

As she said that, Ai Fa stared straight at my face.

“I won’t interfere with your work, and I can even help at least a bit with carrying things. If I get sleepy, then I’ll just take a rest... Or are you saying me coming to town would be inconvenient for you?”

“Not at all. I’d feel more relieved like that, too.”

I earnestly meant that, from the depths of my heart.

The post town definitely wasn’t a safe place, but it put me a lot more at ease for her to be there than alone in the house.

However... that day didn’t end as per usual.

The work itself went perfectly smoothly, but in the end, we decided we needed to rely on the aid of the Ruu clan after all.

Ai Fa’s wounds didn’t have much to do with it, though. No, what threw a wrench in our plans was a certain someone intruding during work hours.

It was a new member of the Suun clan, finally reaching their evil graspers out towards Ai Fa and me in earnest.

Chapter 3: The Sixth and Seventh Days—A Corrupt Messenger

1

At any rate, work went smoothly.

As always, the sixth day of business started with plenty of customers from the east and south crowding around before opening, then buying a whole lot of food. Just how much of the 150 meals we prepared would we actually manage to sell, though? My expectations on that front were quite high, right from the start of the morning.

“Hmm... It feels less busy today than yesterday, doesn’t it?” Lala Ruu questioned as soon as the morning rush died off.

“That’s true. We showed them yesterday we can stay open till the early afternoon, so there were probably less who felt the need to force themselves to line up first thing in the morning. Well... I’m still just guessing though, and we won’t really be able to say for certain until everything is over.”

“Hmm? Then what’ll we do if there’s food left over?”

“In that case, I intend to negotiate with the Ruu settlement to see if I can exchange it for uncooked poitan and meat. I mean, I can’t just let all this go to waste.”

As we were talking, though, there were customers from the south and east periodically stopping by.

Even the number of people from the west peeking our way didn’t seem any less than yesterday. On my first day of business I had thought pretty much nobody was around at this hour, but it was dramatically more lively now.

“Alright, for now it looks like the flow of customers has calmed down, so let’s take snack breaks again in groups of two. After that, can I put you in charge of the giba burgers, Lala Ruu?”

“Right, got it... Which dish do we get to eat today?”

“Today, I was thinking we’d try myamuu giba meat along with tarapa sauce. It’ll be a special dish just for the employees.”

“Huh?” Lala Ruu questioned, her blue eyes opening wide.

Frankly, I was a little shocked to see just how surprised she was.

“What’s the matter? Don’t you think tarapa sauce would pair well with the taste of the meat soaked in marinade? And both ways should use pretty much the same amount of ingredients.”

“N-No, I was thinking earlier that it would probably be good like that, so I was just surprised.”

“Ah, I see. Well, I figured you would like it, Lala Ruu.”

When I said that, Lala Ruu question, “Why?” as her eyes went wide again.

“Why, you ask...? You didn’t much care for the softness of the hamburgers, but you said you loved the tarapa sauce, so that seems like the perfect combination, right?”

“Why do you remember every little thing like that...? It’s been over 10 days since we talked about that!”

“Huh? Well, it’s hard to get specific reactions from the people of the forest’s edge, so your words really left an impression,” I replied, only for Lala Ruu to mutter out a barely audible little, “Thanks...”

With a smile, I said back, “You’re welcome. Now then, who should get the first break? Do you think you’re about ready to eat, Lala Ruu?”

“Yeah. I’m good to go whenever... Hey, what about Ai Fa?”

Ai Fa had accompanied us to the post town just like she had said, and ever since she finished helping carry everything, she had been resting in the shade of the grove of trees behind the stalls.

Her cloak hid her left arm, while she leaned back against the trunk of a tree with her one knee up in the air and her blade in her right hand. She was a bit far from the stall, though, so I couldn’t quite tell if she was asleep or awake.

“I made enough for her too, but I guess we have to check if she’s up or not first.”

“Ah, in that case, I’ll go ask,” Lala Ruu said, already hurrying towards Ai Fa before she even finished speaking.

Apparently Ai Fa was awake, as they exchanged a few words before Lala Ruu promptly returned.

“She said she’s ready to eat. So first up should be me, you, and Ai Fa.”

“Right, but I don’t mind either way.”

Thinking about it, I’m pretty sure this wasn’t the first time I’d noticed Lala Ruu seemed to want to get along with Ai Fa.

I know she said we shouldn’t rely on the Ruu clan, but I still don’t think we should act all hardhearted when any of them are personally trying to be friendly.

At any rate, I left the giba burger stall to Sheera Ruu and the myamuu giba stall to Vina Ruu, then we went over to Ai Fa holding our snacks.

“Sorry for the wait. It’s giba meat with tarapa sauce, wrapped in baked poitan.”

“Right,” Ai Fa replied with a casual nod.

Ai Fa had been working more than she probably should have all morning, but she didn’t seem to be having any problems with her injury hurting or her fever flaring back up. In fact, she just had her usual serious look on her face.

Lala Ruu and I went ahead and sat down, sandwiching Ai Fa between us.

“You seem like you’re feeling alright. And today’s luggage was a pretty big load, so you were a serious help there.”

“Until I have recovered enough to go back into the forest, I can lend you my aid every morning. However, you’ll have to figure out how to manage after that on your own.”

“I mean, I can think about it as hard as I like, but in the end I’m just going to have to put all my strength and stamina into getting it done.”

Even that short conversation had been almost enough to finish the miniature

sized snacks.

I went ahead and stopped talking for a second, and then Lala Ruu spoke up, as if she had been waiting for that moment.

“Um, Ai Fa... I wanted to thank you.”

“Thank me...?”

“Yeah. I heard about the sacrificial hunting thing from Shin Ruu. Thank you for talking to him properly about it. He ended up not doing anything dangerous. So, thanks,” she said, giving a little bow with her veiled, red head.

Ai Fa, meanwhile, just tilted her head and looked bewildered.

“I simply said what I thought. That it was foolish to go and use the giba summoning fruit when he was surrounded by so many people depending on him. Sacrificial hunting runs the risk of endangering those around you, too.”

“Right. And Shin Ruu felt really bad about that, too. He said that he had only been thinking of his own pride.”

“...There’s not especially any shame in resolving yourself to rely on your clan.”

Ai Fa’s voice and expression were incredibly blunt, but Lala Ruu gave a satisfied sounding, “Right. I feel the same way,” and a nod.

“Well then, should we head on back? I’m sure Vina’s probably getting all anxious.”

“Right,” I replied, and Lala Ruu and I got up.

Then, Ai Fa called out, “Asuta. Your work is only just getting started... But I can easily see that you’re carrying it out properly,” with an ever so slight smile. “That’s all I wanted to say. Return to your tasks.”

“Right, got it.”

With that, I headed back towards the stall, my spirits greatly bolstered.

And as we walked that short path, Lala Ruu whispered to me, “That seriously surprised me. I didn’t think Ai Fa could smile like that.”

“Huh? Ah, yeah.”

That was actually a pretty reserved smile for Ai Fa as she had been recently, but it was still enough to shock Lala Ruu. I guess that was down to how Ai Fa always had her poker face on in front of others.

After that, Vina and Sheera Ruu had their break, and then I had the two newcomers swap their positions. That meant Sheera Ruu was with me manning the myamuu giba, while the sisters from the main Ruu house were in charge of the giba burgers. I hadn't originally planned to speed up their training like this, but they turned out to be much quicker learners than I had expected.

"I can see you really made the most of your experience from working the Rutim banquet. I'm seriously impressed with your skills."

"I'm truly honored to hear you say that, Asuta," Sheera Ruu replied with a gentle smile.

As I wondered to myself if she was always the sort to smile this often, Sheera Ruu stared straight at the sample plate.

"Asuta, this dish has a very strong flavor to it, but would it be possible to make it weaker?"

"Yeah, of course. You could do that by lowering the amount of time you let the meat soak in the marinade. It seems like this flavoring is a bit strong for the people of the forest's edge, so I actually intend to weaken it when I make it back at the house, too. And it seems like it would be good to go a bit lighter on the myamuu, too."

With that, a hesitant, anxious look filled Sheera Ruu's eyes as she stared at me.

"Um... I was thinking I'd like to have my family try this dish too, but... I don't know how to adjust the time, or make the marinade, so could you please teach me sometime...?"

"I can teach you that much right now, if you want. You have six people in your house, right?" I asked as I started hashing out rough calculations in my head. "Um... I think you'd be good with a bit under a fourth of a container of fruit wine, a fourth of an aria diced up, and a finger's length of myamuu. And right now I let the meat steep for exactly as long as it takes boiled-down poitan to

dry out, so use that as a basis and try cutting down from there. It may be good to try slicing the meat thicker, too. There's no need to make it so thin for people of the forest's edge, and that would naturally help to weaken the flavor of the marinade."

"Right. Thank you," Sheera Ruu added with a broad, joyful smile.

"However, that flavoring ultimately just comes down to my own tastes, so there's no need to firmly stick to that when cooking for your family. If you want a sweeter taste then you can reduce the amount of myamuu, and if you want a mellower flavor you can try adding more aria... And you could even dice up other ingredients and add them if you'd like. Please, try looking for a flavoring that's more to your tastes by doing stuff like that," I added.

Sheera Ruu looked a bit surprised, but then she broke out in another gentle smile that was like a blossoming flower.

"Thank you. Somehow, it feels like ever since I met you, I've had so much happiness in my life. It brings me such joy, knowing that I can feed my family delicious meals."

"It makes me really happy to hear that, too."

As we had that exchange, a rather unusual pairing showed up at our stall: Kamyua Yoshu's apprentice Leito and Tara.

"Asuta, two please!"

"I will also take two."

"Got it. Thanks for your continued business... What's your master doing today?"

"Kamyua worked till morning again, so he's sleeping at the inn. However, he didn't want to miss buying your cooking two days in a row, so he asked me to go in his stead."

Leito was smiling, and so was Tara. And yet, looking between the two of them, the difference was clear. Tara was smiling out of joy felt from the depths of her heart, while Leito just looked like he was being overly mature.

Perhaps it was due to the preconceived notions I had due to him being that

sketchy guy's apprentice, but I still felt a sort of air about him I couldn't ever imagine coming from an innocent child.

"Here, thanks for waiting."

"Thank you. Um... That's the head of the Fa clan, isn't it? She came with you to town today?"

While thinking to myself that he sure was sharp eyed, I went and shot him my sales smile.

"Yes. Today, she helped with carrying luggage. Apparently giba hunting has become quite an ordeal lately, so she's taking several days off from going into the forest."

"I see. I suppose things like that do happen," Leito replied, his smile utterly unchanged.

Just how was Kamyua Yoshu spending his days now that he had thoroughly disappeared into the shadows? It certainly didn't feel like I could probe this boy to find that out.

At any rate, after those young customers disappeared, the stalls really started getting busy.

The sun was finally closing in on its peak, and the number of passersby had clearly started to increase.

We may have had a more lax start than yesterday, but we had still managed to sell 63 meals in total. That was already fantastic business compared to the other shops around, and it wasn't all that big of a difference compared to two days ago, when we sold all 70 meals by the time the sun hit its peak.

Yes, things were going super smoothly.

It seemed like I wouldn't end up regretting having prepared 150 meals.

"Sorry, Lala Ruu, but could I have you go do some shopping? We need two tarapa and tino, and 20 aria."

"Got it," Lala Ruu said, then took off running with the coins in her hand.

That was when I suddenly sensed someone from behind.

“Hmm? What is it, Ai Fa?”

At some point, Ai Fa had apparently come up and started standing behind us. Even Sheera Ruu turned to face Ai Fa with a clear look of surprise in her eyes. Ai Fa, meanwhile, narrowed her eyes ever so slightly and fixed her gaze north.

“...There are people of the forest’s edge.”

I instantly felt my nerves flare up and looked in the same direction as Ai Fa.

If they were coming from the north along the highway, there was a chance they belonged to the Suun clan.

And in the end... One of them was Tei Suun, with his grey hair clearly visible.

The person walking alongside him wasn’t that fleshy blimp, Mida Suun, though. It was a thin woman, wearing a veil and shawl.

There was a strange, ominous feel about the pair, and they cut right through our customers to stand in front of the stall.

“Hmph... I found it a little hard to believe, but it looks like there really are people of the forest’s edge running stalls in the post town.”

The voice that assaulted my ears had a shrill, metallic tone. And... seriously, what was with this woman? Just standing face to face with her was enough to send a chill down my spine.

She was a beautiful woman. Her facial features were all well sculpted, and her proportions may have even been a match for Vina Ruu. Numerous strands of her long, finely done-up dark brown hair were spilling out over her veil. And there was a light shining in her slightly blackish eyes. However, it was a cold, cruel light, reminding me of a venomous snake. The smile on her face was dripping with poison, too.

“My, I had heard tell there was a strange foreigner living at the Fa house, but I never imagined even the clan head was coming along to town. You are the one female hunter of the forest’s edge, the Fa clan head Ai Fa, aren’t you?”

That was it.

The chill running down my spine didn’t come from her appearance, or her

voice that stung my ears. It was from my sense of smell warning me in advance.

The fragrant aroma of fruit wine and myamuu was floating all around the stall. But a truly ominous smell was wafting in from beyond that. Like rusty metal and a bit of decay... It was clearly the stench of putrefied blood.

“Who are you...?” Ai Fa questioned in a low voice.

The corners of her mouth raised up as the woman giving off that horrible smell grinned.

“I’m the eldest daughter of the main Suun house, Yamiru Suun. I hear I owe you for looking after my little brothers, Diga and Doddo, female hunter of the Fa clan.”

2

The eldest daughter of the main Suun house, Yamiru Suun.

While smiling like a viper, that woman cloaked in the ominous stench of blood glared at Ai Fa, me, and Sheera Ruu.

When Sheera Ruu stepped back from the sheer pressure coming off that glare, Vina Ruu called out from the neighboring stall, “Hey... Sheera Ruu, sorry, but could you switch with me for a bit...?”

While keeping her gaze fixed on Yamiru Suun, Sheera Ruu went ahead and slowly moved over that way.

After entrusting her with the wooden spatula for stirring the tarapa sauce, Vina Ruu then gracefully came over our way.

“Long time no see... Do you remember me, I wonder...?”

“...Of course, Vina Ruu, eldest daughter of the main Ruu house,” Yamiru Suun replied, the faint smile remaining on her face.

Vina Ruu’s sleepy-looking eyes narrowed, just like they had when she faced off with Mida Suun.

“Hmph, so the Ruu clan really was wrapped up in this after all. I had heard the Fa house’s foreigner was put in charge of the Rutim banquet’s stove too, so it

seems the Ruu and Fa clans are rather close, doesn't it?"

"That's true... We're getting along wonderfully, aren't we? So, just what did you come to a place like this for...?"

"Hehehe. I just came to deliver a message from the clan head."

With that, Yamiru Suun's chilly, snakelike gaze turned my way.

"Foreigner from the Fa clan, may I ask your name?"

"...I'm Asuta," I replied.

I wasn't feeling especially afraid or anything. It was just that she felt plain eerie, more so than even Mida and Tei Suun.

Why did she have such a clear scent of blood lingering about her? Even if she had just finished dissecting a giba, the stench shouldn't have been clinging to her this badly.

If this was a giba dissection room there would be nothing strange at all, but I couldn't help but feel suspicious and disturbed by her giving off such an obvious smell just by standing there.

"Asuta of the Fa clan, is it? Now then, Asuta, the Suun clan actually has a bit of a problem at the moment."

"Huh...?"

"Mida is crying... He says he wants to eat your cooking like he had at the post town once again."

Mida Suun, huh?

So what exactly is she asking me to do about it?

"And so, I came here today to deliver the words of the Suun clan's head, Zuuro Suun... Asuta of the Fa clan, just one night would be enough, but will you man the Suun clan stove?"

The crunch of gravel under foot sounded out.

Ai Fa had taken just half a step forward.

And naturally, there was a blue blaze burning fiercely in her eyes.

“You said you were the eldest daughter of the main Suun house, Yamiru Suun, didn’t you?”

“Yes, that’s correct, Fa clan head Ai Fa.”

“Asuta may be a foreigner, but he is still a member of the Fa clan. If you have business with my clan, then you should be coming to me with it, as I am the clan head.”

“Oh, is that so? Then what do you—”

“I refuse,” Ai Fa stated, cutting off Yamiru Suun’s shrill voice.

With that, the woman’s voice shifted to a metallic sounding snicker.

“You refuse...?”

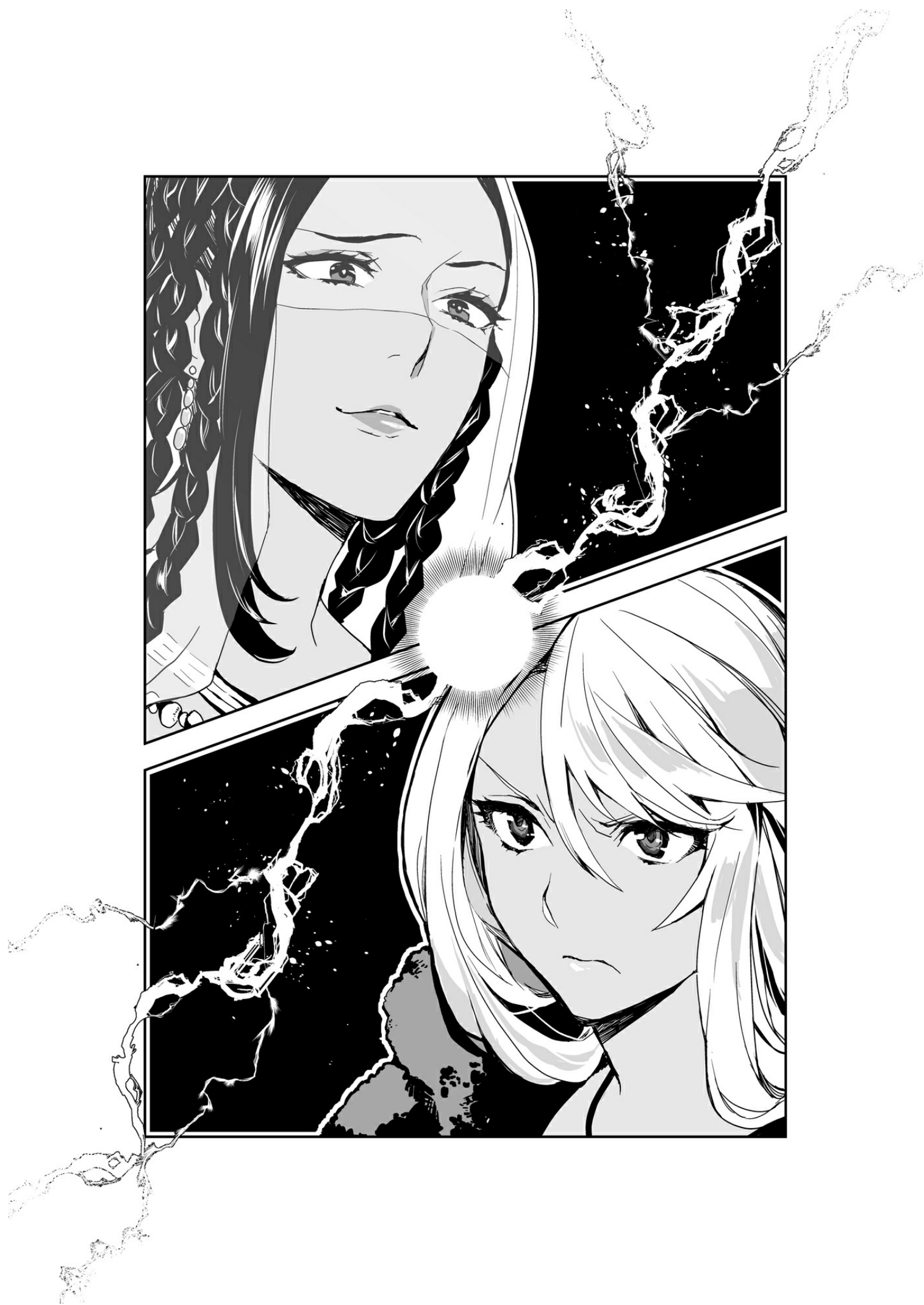
“I do.”

“Well, that’s certainly an issue... I thought Mida would calm down once the night had passed, but yesterday and today have come, and not only has that not happened, but he has kept on wailing. Diga and Doddó have kicked and hit him out of anger, but it’s done no good. And as a result, he’s been eating even more than normal. He really is difficult to deal with.”

“That’s the Suun clan’s problem. The Fa clan has nothing to do with it.”

Ai Fa was clearly furious, and the light of a hunter was burning bright in her eyes.

But in spite of that, the faint smile remained fixed on Yamiru Suun’s face, while Tei Suun just stood there like her shadow.



“Why do you say that, though? You managed the Rutim banquet, so for what reason do you refuse to man the Suun clan’s stove?”

“What reason? You should ask yourself that. Consider how the Suun clan has acted towards the Fa up until now.”

“You mean when Diga crept into the Fa house? Or perhaps when Doddo pointed his blade towards you all in the post town and at the Rutim banquet? If that’s the case, then if my bungling younger brothers apologize to you, will you man the stove?”

“I have no interest in hearing superficial apologies. If they wish to apologize, then they should offer up an arm or some such.”

Her voice didn’t grow louder in the slightest, but it was openly awash in profound anger. Had the Suun clan’s ridiculous request that I man their stove really angered her that badly?

“If you wish to eat Asuta’s cooking, then you can abide by the laws of the post town and pay coins. There is no other means by which a member of the Suun clan will be allowed to eat food that he has prepared.”

“Coins, is it...? But just how many coins would it require to fill Mida’s stomach, I wonder...?” Yamiru Suun questioned, as I spied a suspicious sparkle in her blackish eyes.

This poisonous snake looked like she had found her prey.

“Speaking of which, Asuta, were you paid a fitting price when you manned the Rutim stove?”

“Huh? What about it...?”

“Yes, well the Ruu clan has over 100 people under it. On top of that, you played a big role in the wedding banquet for the Rutim heir, so since the Fa clan are utterly unrelated, you must have been paid a price to accept, correct?”

Something felt dangerous about her approach.

This Yamiru Suun woman didn’t seem the sort to grow violently emotional and run wild like her younger brothers. But I was sure that instead, she was the type to use crafty plots to ensnare her foes.

“Just how much was that payment, I wonder? 10 giba worth of horns and tusks? 20? Or perhaps 30?”

“...I don't believe we're under any obligation to answer that.”

“Oh, I see. Very well... In that case, the Suun clan is prepared to pay you 40 giba worth of horns and tusks.”

I was frozen in place, completely and utterly dumbfounded.

40 giba worth of horns and tusks... That was the equivalent of 480 red coins. Even if they were monopolizing the reward money from Genos, could the Suun clan seriously afford to use up that great of a fortune on such a farce?

I looked left and right, in order to confirm the expressions on Ai Fa and Vina Ruu's faces.

Ai Fa's eyes were burning away with the same blaze as before, while behind Vina Ruu's drooped eyelids, I could see a look of suspicion shining through.

“Y-You're saying you would be willing to pay that much just for manning the stove for one night? In that case, why not just make a purchase from this stall?”

“We won't pay that much for the cooking from your stall. Instead, we wish to entrust you with a similarly grand task as the Rutim banquet.”

I felt like I heard someone gasp. Considering the direction, it had probably been Vina Ruu.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the creepy smile on the face of the female ghoul standing in front of me to check, though.

“On the tenth day of the blue month, the yearly clan head meeting will be held. All clan heads will be gathered there, each bringing one man to accompany them. We would like to have you man the stove for that night in which roughly eighty people will gather, Asuta, and we will pay you 40 giba's worth for it.”

“So that's how it is... I thought you were being overly generous, but you're intending to have each of the clan heads pay one giba's worth, aren't you...?”

“Yes. Asuta's cooking is worth that much, isn't it? After all, the people of the post town detest giba, yet he's skilled enough to sell giba cooking here. Well

then... What do you say, Asu—”

“We refuse,” Ai Fa bluntly repeated, cutting her off again. “It doesn’t matter how much you may pay. We have no reason to accept such a job.”

“Oh, my... Then you intend to keep your fortune and secrets all to yourselves?” Yamiru Suun questioned, her lips curling into a sneer again. “Just yesterday, over 100 people from the post town bought Asuta’s cooking, didn’t they? To do such a thing with giba meat, called hard, smelly, and disgusting, is nothing short of a miracle... So does the Fa clan intend to keep that secret all to themselves, so that only they can profit?”

I secretly gave a gulp.

This woman really did have some sort of hidden trump card. Otherwise, there was no way someone outside of our group would know about our sales numbers from yesterday.

“Are you saying that is some form of crime? We have nothing to be ashamed of. If you wish to know the truth, then bow your heads and beg to be told. But don’t try some roundabout method like asking that he man your stove.”

“Like I said, this all began with Mida. I have no personal interest in your fortune or secrets, Ai Fa of the Fa clan,” Yamiru Suun said, her slender tongue licking her lips. “40 giba worth of horns and tusks. That’s nothing to feel dissatisfied with, is it? As long as you feed Mida in addition to providing for the clan head meeting, you will satisfy our clan head’s request... But if you refuse even so, I’ll just have to give up on everything.”

“Give up on everything...?” I repeated.

Her voice and expression felt way too ominous.

“Yes... Mida is my cute little brother, but my power alone can’t protect him. So I suppose I’ll simply have to leave his fate to the heavens.”

“I don’t understand what you mean...”

“I mean just what I said. As is, he may well get beaten to death by Diga and Doddo, so I’ll have to free him from his chains.”

“Chains...?”

“Yes. I’ll remove his chains, and tell him to go wherever he pleases... As a result, he may get stabbed to death on the spears of the post town’s guards, but that’s a far easier end than getting beaten to death by family, wouldn’t you say?”

Was this woman serious?

In all likelihood, it was just a bluff. She was surely just threatening me, saying she would set Mida Suun loose on me if I didn’t give her the answer she wanted.

In the first place, the very idea of chaining up a family member sounded suspicious. I couldn’t believe anyone would do such a thing, and I didn’t want to hear differently.

Yes, in all likelihood it was a bluff.

I was 99% sure that was all it was.

And yet, this woman felt ominous enough to make me believe in that 1% that it may really be true.

“...As if that has anything to do with us,” Ai Fa stated, her tone utterly unchanged. “If the youngest son of the main Suun house harms a member of my house, I will abide by the laws of the forest’s edge and cut him down. There won’t be any time for the guards to get involved.”

“Hmph, you certainly are a stubborn one.”

Yamiru Suun sent a bewitching smile back at Ai Fa, showing no signs of flinching in the least.

“Well, so be it. I simply stated my own thoughts just now, so I’ll return home and discuss this matter with our clan head. I’ll come again tomorrow at the same time to hear your reply. Decide on your answer by then.”

“Today or tomorrow, our answer won’t change. And if you don’t like that, you can act however you please.”

“I understand your feelings full well, Ai Fa. But after this, talk with the Ruu, Rutim, and Asuta. Well then, I will see you again tomorrow...” Yamiru Suun stated, nodding to Tei Suun at her side.

Finally, Tei Suun, who hadn't said a single word this entire time, gave us a nod with his utterly emotionless eyes and then followed after his mistress.

After that, the remnants of the nightmare they brought dispersed, leaving behind only silence.

"We'll have to discuss this with my father..." Vina Ruu finally muttered along with a sigh. "Just what is that woman plotting...? It just looked like she was nitpicking faults and sowing confusion, but..."

"Yeah, what was with her? I felt like I was getting seriously swindled or something."

I couldn't imagine that all of her words and actions had been thought up on the spot. She had seen through everything far too well for that. She even seemed to have a firm grasp on things that Mida and Tei Suun shouldn't have known from the day before last.

There was no doubt that woman was plotting something, simply using Mida Suun's fixation on my cooking as an excuse.

"What are you thinking about, Asuta...?" Ai Fa called out in a low voice.

When I turned, I found her staring straight at me, the embers of her fierce emotions still smoldering in her eyes.

"There's nothing for you to worry yourself over. Just carry out your own work, and ignore the Suun clan's nonsense."

"Yeah, but..."

"No buts. I will never allow you to man the Suun clan's stove," Ai Fa stated with some anger in her voice, then returned to the shadow of the trees, where she had been before.

When I glanced over at the giba burger stall, I saw Sheera and Lala Ruu staring our way with seriously concerned looks. And so, I gave them a nod to say everything was alright before turning towards Vina Ruu.

"Vina Ruu, what was with that smell just now?"

"Smell...? What about the smell...?"

“Huh? Wasn’t there a strange scent floating in the air that whole time?”

Vina Ruu shook her head.

“The myamuu smell was too strong, so I didn’t notice anything...”

Really?

Well, I did have a better sense of smell than most, so maybe it was actually subtle enough that only I could pick up on it. But even so, that wasn’t enough to erase my suspicion.

I wanted to ask more about the Suun clan and Yamiru Suun in particular, but a customer from Jagar then popped up all of a sudden.

“Hey, are you alright? There’s a sort of dangerous feel in the air somehow, isn’t there?”

“Ah, sorry. It’s nothing all that serious.”

“Really? It sure didn’t look that way... Hey, don’t go causing any weird incidents and getting kicked out of town, alright? I can’t stand the thought of losing the chance to eat your cooking, since that’s always the bright spot of my day.”

“I’m incredibly honored to hear you say that... Will just one be fine for today?”

“Hmm? No, I’ll take three. Hey, it’s fine now!”

With that, another two men from Jagar shuffled over our way.

Had they been waiting for Yamiru and Tei Suun to leave? It looked like there were customers from Jagar and Sym approaching the giba burger stall now, too.

I guess it’s pretty hard to approach when there are people of the forest’s edge around giving off such a dangerous feeling...

In all likelihood, this was a critical moment.

With this, the Suun clan had finally started openly meddling in my affairs.

Even if Yamiru Suun’s sickening story from before was all a bluff, it was still inevitable that the very act of Mida Suun coming uninvited to the stall without a coin to his name would lead to a huge commotion. And if that led to some kind

of big incident, I was going to get exiled from the post town for sure.

The very thought of manning the Suun stove was enough to make my hair stand on end, but that didn't mean it was necessarily a good idea to just flat out reject them. If we didn't think this over and deal with it properly, it could mean the end of this shop even though it was well on track.

With things as they are now, we can't rely on Kamyua Yoshu... I guess we've just got to consult with Donda Ruu and Gazraan Rutim.

Plus, it would be essential to convince Ai Fa.

Sensing that may actually be the greatest hurdle here, I gave a little sigh.

And as I was sighing, I noticed for the first time that there was some sort of violent emotion swirling around in my gut.

I couldn't help but feel shocked and wonder what this powerful feeling inside me was.

"I hate them..." I seemed to sense someone chanting inside.

But I naturally didn't have some other personality hiding within, so that chant had to be coming from me.

"Who do I hate, though?" I asked myself.

"Anyone who gets in my way," the other me responded.

Was I really that short-tempered of a person? I mean, this wasn't the first time a member of the Suun clan had gone and done something awful, right?

So what was I so worked up about?

I mean... That was pretty much their way of doing things, right...?

Their?

By that I meant... Those guys who used such awful tactics to interfere with my old man's business, maybe?

When my old man wouldn't listen to them, they hit him with a truck, then finally were without a doubt the ones who set fire to the shop... Was I overlapping those cruel bastards with the Suun clan in my head?

I've got to calm down, here. They may think the same way, being scum who make a mess of someone else's business, caring about nothing but themselves... But it's not like the situations are all that close, right?

I gave a big sigh and swallowed down the powerful emotions that had been steadily creeping up.

I won't just do what the Suun clan says, of course... But it's easy to lose a winning fight when you let the blood rush to your head. So I've got to start by calming myself.

When I came back to my senses, I realized Vina Ruu was staring at me with a vacant gaze.

"What is it?" I asked, shaking my head.

"Asuta... So you can get that look in your eyes too, huh...? You almost looked like my father or Ai Fa there..."

"Huh? That's a big problem! I can't handle customers looking like that!"

With that, I gave myself a firm slap on the cheeks.

And man did it hurt.

"...Let's focus on work. Could you switch with Sheera Ruu again? And make sure Lala Ruu properly understands how to put together the giba burgers, alright?"

"Yeah..." Vina Ruu replied, falling back despite looking reluctant to do so.

First off, we had to handle the job in front of us now. Worrying about stuff would have to wait till after that.

Now that I noticed, the sun was already just about at its peak, and we still had plenty of food left.

And so, I had no choice but to store away all my worries deep in my chest and work as hard as I could.

3

No further disasters came our way after that, and we were able to safely

finish our business for the day.

A number of customers from the west came bit by bit, and we ended up holding out till the very end, selling 141 meals in total.

On our sixth day of business, we had at last hit the limit for our customer traffic. It was unclear if we would have to adjust our numbers from here on out, but we still were approaching my goal at a far quicker pace than I had ever expected.

I wanted giba meat to be seen as valuable enough to be worth paying coins for it, and I wanted to bring prosperity to the forest's edge. In order to see those objectives met, we had taken on this reckless challenge.

I definitely didn't want to let anyone get in my way.

And so for that reason, we decided to visit the Ruu settlement.

"I never figured the Suun clan would propose something that absurd..." Donda Ruu grumbled, holding a container of fruit wine in one hand.

It was past dinner in the Ruu house. The only ones left in the main hall illuminated by animal fat candles were the four men of the main Ruu house, Mia Lea and Vina Ruu, me and Ai Fa, and Gazraan Rutim, who had hurried over from the Rutim settlement.

"The stove for the clan head meeting, is it? If it weren't for the fact that the Suun clan will be running it, that would be no worry at all. It certainly is troublesome when you can't tell what your foe is after, isn't it?" Gazraan Rutim, who we were seeing for the first time in around ten days, muttered.

Apparently, Dan Rutim was indifferent to the matter of our shop in the post town, so he entrusted everything to his extremely calm and composed heir.

"Sorry, but what exactly is that clan head meeting thing anyway? It's some big gathering held once a year, right?"

"Yes. Once a year, the clan heads all gather in the Suun settlement to report on their circumstances. After all, the settlement is vast, so it would be impossible to know how each clan was doing otherwise."

That clan head meeting was on the tenth day of the blue month... Eight days

from now. Maybe that was why Ai Fa had reacted to the mention of the blue month this morning.

“The meeting itself is held in the early afternoon, and after that there is a modest dinner for everyone. Then after staying the night in the Suun settlement, everyone returns home at daybreak... But the Suun clan requested that Asuta man the stove for that dinner, right?”

“Hmm, but what’s the deal, here? The thing with Mida Suun is probably just an excuse, and they have some other plot... But just what point is there to summoning me to the Suun house?”

“I do not know. Rather, don’t you have any thoughts on that matter, Asuta?” Gazraan Rutim gently replied, and I gave a little nod back.

“The thing is, that Yamiru Suun woman seemed to be aware of how much profit our stalls were pulling in. I figure that means the information is probably leaking through the currency exchange.”

“The currency exchange?”

“Yeah. It’s obvious the Ruu and Rutim don’t, but I can’t imagine the Suun clan really intermingling with the townsfolk, either. But the currency exchange operates in the post town under the lord’s orders, so I think it would be pretty plausible for them to be leaking information to the Suun clan.”

I used their services every day, so the person running the place should have a good grasp on how my business was going. And since there were ties between the Suun clan as the leaders of the forest’s edge and the lord of Genos, they could certainly get information through that route.

“The Suun clan is already aware of the amount my business is making. And so, I think that may be tied to the main cause here... What do you think?”

“That may be exactly right... Actually, that may even be the most natural thought here. The head of the Suun clan and the leader of the forest’s edge, Zuuro Suun, surely has his eyes on the fortune you’ve amassed, Asuta,” Gazraan Rutim stated.

Hearing that, Ludo Ruu shouted, “That’s ridiculous! Still, it does sound just like the Suun clan. They probably just want to live their lives buried in coins.”

“That’s true. I had thought that we would need to come up with a plan so that the Suun clan couldn’t monopolize any fortune made from selling meat once such a thing is possible, but before that, the profits from Asuta’s shop alone proved enough to tempt Zuuro Suun.”

“But how does them wanting me to man their stove tie into things? Do they want to try to steal my cooking techniques?”

I wasn’t even trying to hide those in the first place, though.

But Gazraan Rutim just slowly shook his head.

“The Suun clan head has fallen to the depths of depravity, so he wouldn’t be thinking of such roundabout methods. Zuuro Suun most likely wants to get ahold of you directly... It’s possible he’s plotting to invite you to marry into his clan, isn’t it?”

“Marry... You mean with that Yamiru Suun woman?”

Just imagining it was enough to cause a chill to run down my spine.

Well, even if we weren’t talking about that creepy woman, I just wasn’t planning on marrying anyone right now.

“Still, isn’t that a bit hasty, having a foreigner like me marry into their clan for a reason like that?”

“That was just one example. However, I’m certain that he wishes to get ahold of you. That’s the sort of man that Zuuro Suun is.”

This time, it was Donda Ruu’s turn to mutter “Ridiculous...” in response. “It’s so stupid I can’t even laugh at it. I mean, this pale foreigner, marrying into the clan that leads our people?”

His tone was quiet, but there were powerful emotions burning in his eyes.

It seemed like Donda Ruu had even more trouble restraining his emotions than usual when it came to the Suun clan.

“So... What do you intend on doing, kid?”

“Th-The idea of marrying into the Suun clan is nuts. To start with, even the idea of manning their stove is totally crazy... But if Mida Suun came to the post

town and ran wild, there's a high risk that I'll be exiled from there."

"Why's that? That'd be Mida Suun's crime, not yours, Asuta."

"Yeah. But when I didn't prepare enough food and some customers from Sym and Jagar started getting into a quarrel, I almost got thrown out of town. The guards who protect order about town, plus Milano Mas who runs the area with the stalls, seem to think just me being there is unpleasant."

"Is that the law of the city...?"

"More than that, it may just be their personal feelings."

"Huh, those city folk are more ridiculous than I thought. So they value their feelings more than the law?" Ludo Ruu questioned, sounding amused, only for his father to shoot him an annoyed glare.

"Ludo, are you in any position to talk all high and mighty? Are you saying you respect each and every law of the forest's edge?"

"I follow all the important ones, right?" Ludo Ruu childishly snapped back.

As I watched that exchange out of the corner of my eye, I decided to keep talking.

"Also, like I mentioned before, back when there was that incident with Doddo Suun, the guards listened more to his excuses than anything Ai Fa and I had to say. Considering all that, it's certainly possible that Mida Suun going wild could lead to the worst case scenario where only I face punishment for it. That Yamiru Suun woman could be keeping all that in mind when plotting to set Mida Suun loose on me."

To be honest, that was more just what I wanted to believe rather than proper speculation.

The thought that they really had Mida Suun in chains, and wouldn't mind if the guards killed him... I didn't want to believe it could be true.

If they had tossed aside not only their pride as people of the forest's edge but even their affection towards family, then they were just way too irredeemable.

"Hmm... But Ai Fa, you don't want Asuta going anywhere near the Suun clan, correct?"

For the first time, the conversation was thrown Ai Fa's way.

However, though there was a restless shine in her eyes, she didn't respond. Ever since our encounter with Yamiru Suun, Ai Fa seemed to be in a bad mood.

"I can certainly understand those feelings. Since it's the clan head meeting, you yourself can't constantly stay by Asuta's side. And also... the clans under the Suun will be attending too. In a manner of speaking, they may be even more dangerous... But Asuta, you intend to keep on operating your business in the post town, don't you?"

"Yes. Things are going far better than expected, so I intend to keep on striving my hardest until my initial objectives come to fruition."

"Hmm... In that case, we really do need to plot out how to fully resolve this, don't we?"

Placing his hand on his sturdy chin, Gazraan Rutim sunk deep into thought.

As I stared at him from the side, Ludo Ruu made another hawkish statement.

"Hey, why not just flatly turn down their offer? Then if that lump of flesh comes after you, we can just strike him down, right? It'd be a bit of a hassle to handle without a blade, but I and at least one other man could beat him down."

"But in that case, we would need to wait for Mida Suun to act violently. We would be at fault if we did anything before they made a move, and if we're seen as acting maliciously... Even if we manage to get rid of Mida Suun, Asuta may still be driven from town," Gazraan Rutim stated, getting all depressed by his own thoughts, but he continued on with his extremely logical statement. "Also, it would be difficult to have two men stay by Asuta's side, since we have no idea when Mida Suun may appear. They wouldn't be able to carry out their work as hunters like that."

"Geez, what a pain. What should we do, then?"

"Well... I suppose there's no choice but to agree for now to man the banquet."

When Gazraan Rutim said that, Ai Fa's eyelids started twitching.

"But it would be too dangerous to have Asuta handle it alone. I don't know

what they may be planning, but regardless, it will be essential for us to come up with a method to protect him.”

“Hmm? Well, it’s the clan head meeting, so dad and Dan Rutim will be there, plus the men accompanying them. But they can’t protect Asuta if they’re not allowed in the kitchen, right?”

“Yes. That is women’s work, after all,” Gazraan Rutim stated, looking over at Donda and Mia Lea Ruu.

“Women of the Ruu and Rutim will accompany Asuta... How about making that one of the conditions for accepting the job?”

“Hmm? You’re saying we’ll be taking charge of the stove for the clan head meeting alongside Asuta?” Mia Lea Ruu questioned, not looking the least bit shaken.

Donda Ruu, meanwhile, shot Gazraan Rutim a probing gaze.

“Asuta’s cooking is special. And also, there will be 80 people gathering for the clan head meeting. We’ll insist that the women of the Ruu and Rutim are necessary to prepare such a vast amount of food, since they’re already familiar with the techniques... Then insist that the women of the Suun clan assist, and pound the cooking methods into them, whether they want to learn or not.”

“I see. That way they would be able to satisfy Mida Suun even without me around, right?”

“Yes. And to go a step further, if he learns that the Ruu and Rutim already know those techniques too, Zuuro Suun may become less fixated on you in particular.”

That sounded like a pretty effective method to me.

“Your words are quite complex, Gazraan Rutim. But... if we’re talking about helping Asuta, then I have no objections,” Mia Lea Ruu said with a smile. Her smile really did look just like the ones Ludo and Lala Ruu made.

I chewed on that rather out of place thought for a bit, that they really were mother and children despite the fact that their faces weren’t all that similar.

“And if we’re going to be spanking the rears of those Suun women, then all

the better. The blame for a house falling to corruption falls on more than just the men. I'll leave it to you all to take the men to task, but I'll gladly take charge of handling the women."

"Hey. Are you planning on ditching your duty of keeping the house together, and run off to the Suun settlement of all places?" Donda Ruu grumbled, sounding disgruntled.

"That's not a problem, is it?" Mia Lea Ruu replied with a smile. "There won't be many folks left in the house, anyway. If we just leave Tito Min and Rimee behind, they should be able to handle the housework... Now that I think of it, who are you planning on bringing to accompany you on that day?"

"Hmm... Actually, I was thinking of taking Darmu," Donda Ruu said, looking at his second son.

The bandages were now mostly removed from his head, but he still had them all wrapped around the middle of his face.

"It's eight days till the clan head meeting, is it? Well, I suppose we'll have to see how much his wounds can heal by then."

"If Darmu can't do it, then it'll be me, right?" Ludo Ruu happily chimed in.

As I pondered to myself if that meant Jiza Ruu wouldn't be called upon, I spied a slightly regretful look in Gazraan Rutim's eyes.

"On the night of the clan head meeting, the custom is for we heirs to look after our houses. That isn't necessarily true for small clans with few men, but the Ruu and Rutim must abide by that custom. For the Rutim, I believe the second son of the house will be accompanying our clan head."

"I see... So if the clan heads and the men accompanying them add up to 80, that means there are only 40 clan heads in total, right? Isn't that a pretty small number, seeing how there are around 500 people of the forest's edge?"

"Only the heads of the main houses attend the meeting. The branch families aren't included."

Now that I thought about it, I recalled the second Rutim son was already married and had a child, and was in charge of his own branch family.

But at any rate, the Fa clan didn't have any branch families or anything, so Ai Fa participated all on her own last year, huh? On top of that, it was held at the home of the Suun clan, who she had bad blood with, and she couldn't rely on anyone to help her.

Man, just how tough was my clan head?

"Darmu," Donda Ruu called out, staring at his second son with an intense gaze. "That kid gets worked up too easily, so I'd feel uneasy bringing him. Heal up your wounds enough to move about properly in the next eight days."

"Understood," Darmu Ruu replied with a nod, while Ludo Ruu puffed up his cheeks and said, "Geez..."

"In that case, Jiza, Ludo, Jiba, and Sati Lea will remain at the house. Tito Min and Rimee should be able to manage the stove. I'll take Vina, Reina, and Lala along with me to help Asuta with his work. And we should have no problem borrowing two or three women from the branch families, right?"

"We'll also offer a number from the Rutim, so that should make for 10 women or so in total. If that many are always by Asuta's side, I believe that should prevent any Suun plots in their house's kitchen... What do you think?"

That last question was directed towards me and Ai Fa.

In the end, the two of us would be the ones to make the decision.

Would we accept this suspicious job from the Suun clan, or no? If we accepted, the Ruu and Rutim were saying they would lend us this much of their strength...

They had realized this job would have a large impact not just on my work in the post town but the very future of the forest's edge, so they had promised their assistance before we could even ask them for it.

Ai Fa... was biting her lip and looking a bit pained.

"So... We have no choice but to accept the Suun clan's request after all?"

"Yes. I believe it's far safer trying to protect Asuta in the kitchen than to do so in the post town. Even if we deal with Mida Suun, there will always be a reason for concern as long as Zuuro Suun remains fixated on Asuta."

Gazraan Rutim stared straight at Ai Fa's distressed profile.

"And also, now that things have come this far, we should let all the clans know through the clan head meeting just what the Fa clan is thinking by opening a shop in the post town. And we should additionally inform them of the importance of bloodletting and proper dissection techniques."

"Huh? We're going to reveal that this early on," I questioned, only for Gazraan Rutim to give a big nod back.

"There's no helping it now that we've come to this point. All of our people should know the truth, that interfering with your business is obstructing the prosperity of the forest's edge. And the fact that there will be an even greater fortune to be made once giba meat has value may also distract Zuuro Suun from focusing directly on you."

With that, Gazraan Rutim suddenly broke out in a smile.

"After discussing that matter at the clan head meeting, they'll all be eating your cooking. After that, our points will seem all the stronger, wouldn't you say? I can already imagine them thinking that they could even see townsfolk wanting giba meat if it can be used in such delicious cooking."

Gazraan Rutim may just have been intending to seize the initiative and use this dilemma to in turn guide the future of the forest's edge.

They say offense is the greatest defense... But still, it was almost frightening how decisive he could be.

"But ultimately, that's nothing but the path that I personally believe is best. Donda Ruu seems to have his own thoughts on the matter, and the final decision still falls to you and Ai Fa."

"Hmph... It's not like I'm lending you aid because I've been fooled by your smooth talking or anything. I'm just agreeing to loan you our women in exchange for a fair price," Donda Ruu bluntly stated. "If you want them to help out with manning the stove for the clan head meeting, then I expect you to pay appropriately. That's all I wanted to say."

"Oh, you're so stubborn, dear," Mia Lea Ruu said with a sigh of exhaustion.

“So naggy...” Donda Ruu muttered, facing the other way.

It was then that Ai Fa glanced at me out of the corner of her eye, and I gave a big nod back.

“Just the thought of manning the Suun stove makes me shudder. It’s a bit different when it comes to the clan head meeting, though. And if folks from the Ruu and Rutim will be with me, and we can straighten out the Suun clan’s crookedness even a little... Then I guess I have no serious objections.”

Ai Fa remained silent.

“At any rate, I can’t stand the thought of the Suun clan interfering with my business. If I failed due to my own lack of skill that would be one thing, but if the Suun clan got in my way out of nothing but their selfish desires... At the very least, that’s one thought I just can’t stand.”

I could feel the violent emotions in my gut wriggling about. But I desperately held them back, and stared into Ai Fa’s eyes.

“...I see,” Ai Fa replied, casting her gaze towards the floor. “I find it greatly troubling to go so far in borrowing the strength of the Ruu and Rutim, who we have no relation to, but—”

“Don’t act like such a stranger! You all saved Jiba’s soul, taught us how to make delicious food, and provided such a wonderful meal for the Rutim banquet, didn’t you? I consider you and Asuta precious friends, Ai Fa,” Mia Lea Ruu loudly proclaimed with a smile. “Plus, if we leave the Suun clan be and they wreck Asuta’s shop, Vina and Lala will be out of a job too, right? In that case, this is also important for the sake of protecting the Ruu clan’s wealth. And so, there’s no need for you to hold back. In fact, if you do, it could lead to our harm. Please keep that firmly in mind as you decide on the path you believe to be the right one.”

“In that case... Will you lend us your strength?”

Ai Fa placed her right fist on the floor and stared up intently at Mia Lea Ruu.

“Since we’re talking about the clan head meeting, I also won’t be able to go near the kitchen... During that time, will you protect this member of my house?”

“We will. No matter what, we won’t allow the Suun clan to pull anything.”

Vina Ruu, who was seated next to her mother, also nodded along with a serious expression on her face.

Ai Fa was silent for a moment... But then she bowed her head.

“In that case, I... I agree with Gazraan Rutim’s opinion.”

In all likelihood, Ai Fa was against the idea of trusting our fates to anyone else, even a little. That must have been why her face looked so pained.

But we never would have been able to open a shop in the post town by our power alone in the first place. If she couldn’t stand that, we would have just stayed on our own, living modest lives in the Fa house all on our own.

And yet, we opened the shop in the post town in the hopes of bettering the future for the people of the forest’s edge... Unless we were planning on trudging our way backwards along that path, then I believed it was important we join our strengths together with the Ruu and Rutim in order to keep moving forward.

That was how I had planned to convince Ai Fa, but apparently while deeply worrying over the matter, she had reached the same conclusion I had all on her own.

Though nobody noticed it, that thought secretly filled me with joy.

“Then it’s decided... Well then, let’s save working out all the details for tomorrow morning. I’m going to sleep,” Donda Ruu solemnly stated, his words signaling the end of this secret discussion between three clans.

The members of the Ruu house all returned to their rooms, while we three guests headed towards the door. Just like before the wedding, the plan was for Gazraan Rutim to stay with one of the branch families, while Ai Fa and I were to spend the night in the vacant house.

Gazraan Rutim stepped outside a bit before us, while I waited for Ai Fa to put on her footwear with just one hand. As that was going on, Mia Lea Ruu approached.

“Excuse me, Ai Fa. I was just wondering, could we have you stay here in the

Ruu settlement until the day of the clan head meeting?”

“Why...?”

“Naturally, because we’ll need to meet a number of times beforehand, and also because we will need to get in a good bit of practice making the food we’ll be serving at the clan head meeting. So wouldn’t it just be more convenient if you were to wake up here at the Ruu settlement?”

“But...”

“You can just bring all the meat and vegetables from the Fa house here. That way, you won’t need to keep returning there, right? And also... You don’t need to worry about Darmu and Reina. The pain they feel in their hearts will be the same whether you and Asuta are here or not.”

“M-Mia Lea Ruu, what are you...?” I started to question in a fluster, but she just shot back a complacent smile.

I’d use that same word to describe Kamyua Yoshu’s smiles, but unlike with him, her smile was overflowing with warmth.

“I can at least tell how my own son and daughter feel. And those kids in particular are just like me and our clan head when we were young. Jiza and Vina can be a bit tricky sometimes, though... At any rate, we want to be fully prepared when dealing with that troublesome Suun clan, don’t we? So I can count on you, right?”

Then, Mia Lea Ruu returned to her room without even waiting for a response.

Ai Fa and I shared a look, each of our eyes full of complex emotions.

“I somehow feel like I’m seeing the depths of Mia Lea Ruu’s capabilities today...” Ai Fa quietly said with a sigh, then she wrapped on her leather footwear.

When we finally left the house, Gazraan Rutim was still standing there waiting for us.

“Good work today, Ai Fa and Asuta. You have work again tomorrow, but we kept you quite late, didn’t we?”

“Ah, no. We’re just going to sleep after this, so it’s no problem.”

I had already finished the preparations for tomorrow in the Ruu house's kitchen. In fact, since I was able to leave the dinner to the women of the house, it went even more smoothly than usual. And so, I didn't foresee staying here having any negative impact on business in the least.

"I hadn't expected that Zuuro Suun would fix his eyes on you at this point, Asuta... Though I suppose I should say also that I had never anticipated you to be earning so much in such a short period of time, either."

As we walked together under the moonlight towards our resting places, Gazraan Rutim shot me a gentle smile.

"I thought I had grasped how much strength you possessed, but I'm ashamed at how ignorant I was."

"It's not my strength, it's the strength of the giba meat. And I have to admit that I underestimated it when I started doing business, too."

"I'm certain when your strength and that of the giba meat are combined, it will bring even greater prosperity here to the forest's edge... And for that reason as well, we need to keep the Suun clan's tyranny at bay here and now."

Gazraan Rutim looked back and forth between me and Ai Fa, a calm yet incredibly strong look in his eyes.

"Once I discuss the matter with my father Dan and Donda Ruu, I believe it will be necessary to explain the circumstances to the other affiliated clans such as the Min, Lea, and Maam, and join our strengths with theirs. Let us overcome this trial by working together, Ai Fa, Asuta."

"Right. We're happy to be working with you, too."

The Suun clan was a threat, but with the Ruu, Rutim, and Ai Fa together, we would never yield to them. That was what I believed.

My personal strength was puny, but if we had them, we would be fine.

And I would carry out my own work, too. I would never let them crush our shop through such unscrupulous means.

As I looked up at the entirely different sea of stars from the one over my old world, I swore that firmly in my heart.

“Well then, do we have a deal...?”

It was the following day, the third day of the blue month and our seventh day of business.

Just as promised, Yamiru Suun had returned to the post town, and would leave with a satisfied smile on her face.

“Thanks to this, Mida will be saved. I’ll make sure to tell my younger brothers not to do anything foolish either, so you needn’t worry... Well then, I’ll be looking forward to that day.”

Ultimately, she ended up accepting every single one of our demands.

Yamiru Suun didn’t show even the slightest sign of disapproving the request of having women from the Ruu clan come along to assist me, or to having as many women from the Suun clan assist as possible.

It actually went so smoothly that it ended up feeling eerie, but at the very least, we had cleared away our immediate concerns.

“Alright, let’s put that aside and focus on our work... That nuisance is gone, so shall we finally try selling this?”

Ai Fa retreated to the grove in the rear, while I shot a smile at Vina Ruu as she rotated over to the myamuu giba stall.

“This” had referred to the giba jerky that the people of the forest’s edge ate during the day.

It was a food that prioritized preservation over taste, which made it pretty unpalatable. To be blunt, it just tasted strongly of salt and pico leaves, and was exceptionally tough. I honestly couldn’t even chew through it without letting it soften up in my mouth first.

However, dried meats were already sold to travelers passing through the post town, and I couldn’t say that those were any better. Kimyuus was a bit softer but tasted of nothing but spices, while karon had a taste like high class beef jerky, but it was even tougher than giba meat.

It was possible I would be met with objections, questioning if I was greedily trying to make even more coins on top of what I was getting from selling meals... But if I wasn't prepared for dealing with a bit of friction, I never would have started this shop to begin with. In order to get the people of the post town to acknowledge the value of giba meat, I would try everything that I could.

By the way, as for the price of the jerky, I saw that karon was notably more expensive than kimyuus, so I set my price with that in mind. The price was roughly 200 grams for three red coins, and the custom seemed to be to sell it in chunks of four or six hundred grams.

Now that I think about it, meat and vegetables sure are cheap. If I treat one red coin as 100 yen, that would make the pseudo-onion aria 20 yen each, the cabbage-esque tino 50 yen, and 100 grams of karon 150 yen... Whereas even a cheap kitchen knife would be 4500 yen, and a pot would be 24000 yen, huh?

It may not have been excessively so, but food still felt awful cheap when compared to leather and cloth goods.

At any rate, jerky took a good bit of effort to make, so it ended up with a fittingly high price. Fresh meat, however, cost way less. According to what Dora told me, even when you were just buying it to use in your own home, 100 grams wouldn't even cost a full red coin. Kamyua Yoshu had told me before that meat cost more than vegetables, but it was still a whole lot cheaper than it was back where I came from.

That must be why giba didn't get any attention in terms of meats. In that case, I'd like to at least see giba meat be worth the same amount as karon.

As that thought ran through my head while I shaved off jerky with a knife to serve as samples, a man from Sym wearing a hood quietly approached.

From underneath the hood, I could spy long silver hair.

"Huh? What is it, Shumiral?"

I was certain he had already ordered a giba burger first thing in the morning.

But at any rate, his black eyes were staring straight at my hands.

"Is that jerky, giba meat...?"

“Yeah. I was thinking of selling this from today on, too. If you’d like to try a sample, then go right ahead,” I said, holding out the plate with the shaved off jerky.

Shumiral nodded, then he ate one.

“...How many coins, does it cost?”

“I was thinking of going with the same price as karon jerky. So at this size, it would be six red coins.”

“How much, do you have, now...?”

“Huh? Um, for today I have ten of these chunks prepared.”

Since it was ten chunks of 400 grams, that meant I had around four kilos of meat.

Pretty much only travelers were interested in dried meats to use as rations, so I wasn’t expecting to sell all that much.

I’d like to try out emphasizing taste rather than preservation at some point and make giba bacon...

As that thought ran through my head, Shumiral emotionlessly questioned, “How long, does the jerky, last?”

“If properly stored, it should last for half a year.”

“I see,” Shumiral replied, then he started searching around the inside of his cloak. “I’ll take, all of it.”

“Huh?”

“That will be, six white coins, yes?”

“H-Hold on a second, please! The Silver Vase is staying in the post town for the month, right? So why do you want to buy such a large amount of jerky?” I questioned, completely caught off guard.

“To sell, in another town,” Shumiral replied, tilting his head a bit. “In Genos, food is cheap. We buy food, and sell it, in other towns.”

Resale, huh?

I see. So it wasn't just products from their homeland, but also local specialties they picked up from the towns and cities along the way that they sold. Thanks to that, they continually keep on doing business.

"Giba meat, is rare. I'm sure, it will sell lots, in other towns. I would like, more jerky."

"I see... Exactly how much were you thinking you wanted?"

Shumiral's eyes shot downward a bit as he mulled it over.

"...If it's possible, I would like, 60 white coins worth."

60 white coins... From some rough calculations in my head, that meant around 40 kilos.

Still, the Ruu and Rutim had plenty of excess meat even now, so that would be no problem at all.

"In that case, how about I prepare it all for just before The Silver Vase leaves Genos? If I prepare it right before selling it to you, you should get a full half a year out of it."

Shumiral's eyes narrowed, and he looked ever so slightly happy.

"That method, is a big help. Thank you."

"Not at all! I'm the one who should be thanking you! On top of stopping by for a snack each and every day, you also brought this wonderful proposition my way."

"Our Silver Vase, and you, have formed a very, good bond. I give my thanks, to the eastern god, Sym."

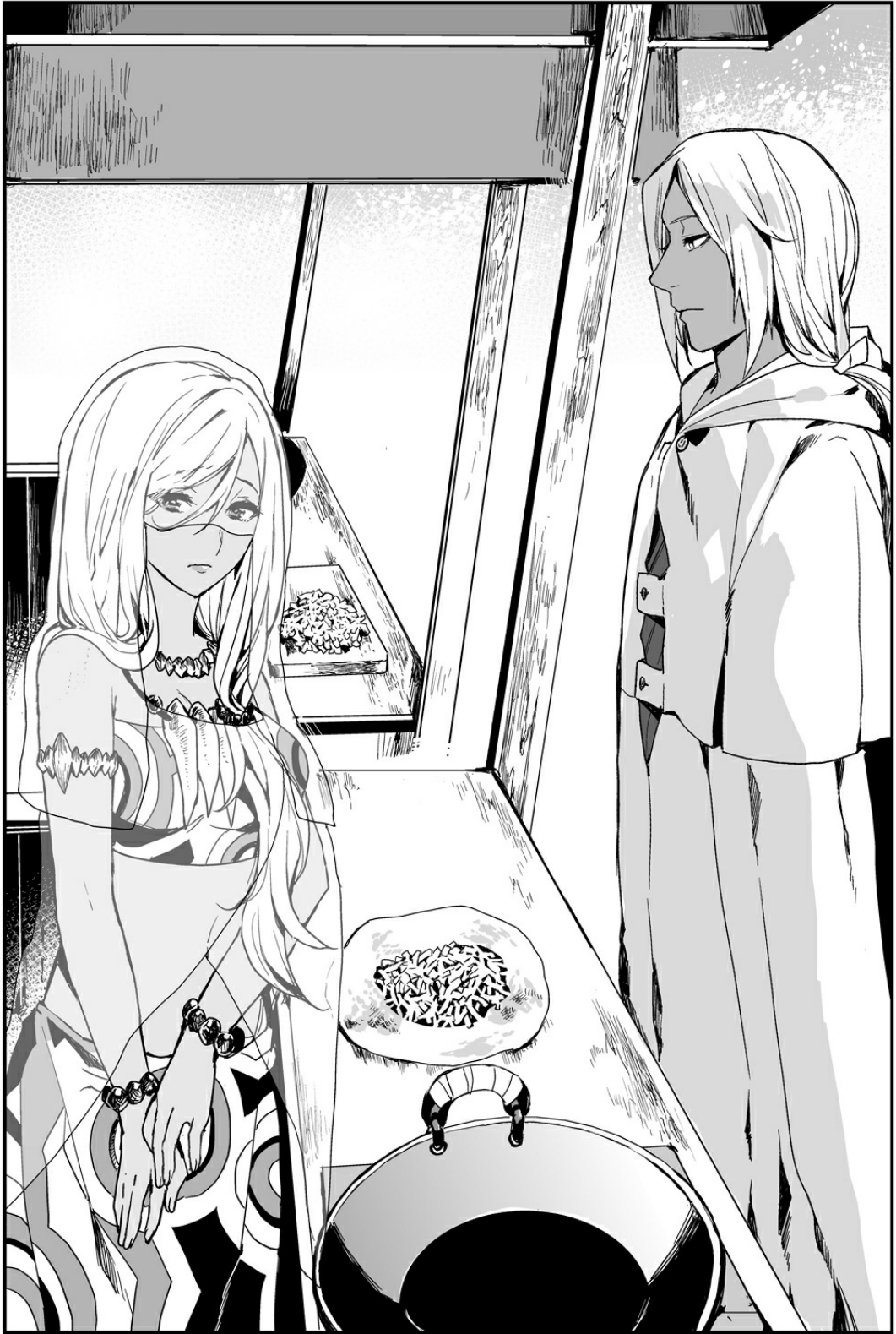
With that, Shumiral's gaze shifted to my side.

Meanwhile, Vina Ruu was staring at the highway and feigning ignorance.

"...Asuta, called you, Vina Ruu. Is that, your name?"

"What of it...?" Vina Ruu answered while glaring at Shumiral and looking like she found this a huge pain.

Shumiral then shook his head, his face remaining utterly expressionless.



“No, I just thought, it was a beautiful name. Well then, excuse me...” Shumiral said, then he raised his hood again and departed.

Vina Ruu haughtily crossed her arms, and I gave a small sigh.

“Hmm, he seemed kind of pained, somehow... Still, he’s seriously becoming an important person in my life.”

“That may be so for you, but it isn’t for me. I told you I just don’t like people whose emotions I can’t read, didn’t I...?”

“Is that so? I feel like it’s a bit of a shame to go and treat him like someone as sketchy as Kamyua Yoshu, though.”

“Yes, he’s completely different, but I still really do find people like you who can’t hide their emotions at all to be far more charming...”

As we had that conversation, Vina Ruu stole a bit of a worried glance behind us.

As always, Ai Fa was still resting in the shadow of a tree about five meters back.

She really didn’t seem to have any energy at all right now.

“That’s why I have a bit of difficulty dealing with people who hide their hearts away like Ai Fa...”

“Hmm... But doesn’t it make you really happy when a person like that occasionally lets their earnest emotions slip through?”

“Is that why you find a woman like Ai Fa so charming...?”

“Th-That’s not what I meant.”

While we enjoyed that peaceful exchange, the number of people passing by had steadily increased.

Just as I was thinking the back half of our fight was kicking off, I spied two familiar faces approaching.

“Asuta, two please!”

“Could I get two, Asuta?”

It was Tara and Yumi, and they had ordered in perfect sync.

The yellowish-brown skinned young woman and ivory-white skinned girl stared straight at each other, with a height difference of about two heads between them.

“Ah! You’re that kid from back then!” Yumi yelled out, and Tara just looked shocked.

“When does ‘back then’ mean?”

“Ah, so you don’t remember? Well, whatever... Still, you seem awful friendly with Asuta.”

“Yeah! I owe him my life!”

That was definitely an exaggeration, but thinking about it, I met Tara during that time with Doddo Suun and Yumi when Mida Suun suddenly showed up. As I pondered how strange fate could be, I set the brazier in place and started sauteing aria.

“Hmm, you’ve sure got some skills, to get even a pureblooded child of Genos as a customer. And then you even sold giba burgers to some old drunks before, didn’t you?”

That second “you” naturally referred to Vina Ruu.

Hearing that, Vina Ruu gracefully shrugged her shoulders.

“I honestly do think it’s a big deal. I mean, your stalls are all the way out here, but you’re earning more than anyone, aren’t you? And there are even a good number of folks from the west coming now too, right?”

“Yes, fortunately. Two of your friends were actually here a little while ago and made a purchase.”

“Hehe. That’s because I’ve been spreading the word all over. I’d bet a ton of young folks have heard of your reputation and stopped in by now, haven’t they?” Yumi proudly boasted.

“I told lots of my friends, too!” Tara loudly chimed in.

Immediately afterwards, though, she looked dejected.

“But they all said they were scared of giba and they wouldn’t come... And that their moms and dads would scold them if they did...”

“There’s no helping that. Folks who have lived in Genos for a long time probably have no interest in eating giba. I figure the only way to deal with that is to just give it time, right?” I said, trying to console Tara as the giba meat cooked.

“Hey, she’s a customer too, isn’t she?! That’s no fair, just acting all polite with me.”

“Huh? Well, there’s the age difference to consider... Ah, and I met Tara before opening the shop. Right, Tara?”

“Yeah!” Tara replied, looking happy again as she gave a big nod.

“Grr, I’m still not happy about it...” Yumi grumbled with a disgruntled look about her. “By the way... How many days have you been running this stall for now?”

“Eh? The neighboring one has been open for seven days now, while it’s been three for this one.”

“I see. Well then, what are you planning on doing next? You’re not just planning on closing up shop after ten days, are you?”

While thinking to myself that she sure was knowledgeable about how the stalls worked, I replied, “I’m not,” with a nod. “At this point, I was thinking I’d like to keep on doing business for as long as I’m able.”

“Well then, how about signing your next contract with our place?”

“Huh?”

“You see, my family actually runs an inn called The Westerly Wind, and we’re also involved with managing the stalls. And my old man may be a real hardhead, but my mom already knows how delicious giba meat is. I’m sure we’d treat you like a normal business partner.”

This was seriously an unexpected proposal.

“The oldtimer who runs The Kimyuus’s Tail has some sort of grudge against the people of the forest’s edge and treats you badly, doesn’t he? And you

probably want to keep doing business under more pleasant circumstances, right?”

“H-Hold on a second, please. Milano Mas, the owner of The Kimyuus’s Tail, has a grudge against the people of the forest’s edge?”

“Yeah, though I don’t really know the details. I think his family member or friend or something was killed by a member of the forest’s edge... But in the end there wasn’t any proof, so things were left all unsettled.”

There was an ever so slightly turbulent shine in Yumi’s eyes.

“Incidents like that happen a lot, so nobody trusts the people of the forest’s edge. I mean, if I hadn’t seen that exchange between you and that monster, I probably never would’ve gotten so close to you... But like you said, that’s something that’ll take some time.”

“Right... That really is how it feels.”

I went ahead and prepared the four myamuu giba, holding back a sigh all the while.

“In regards to the contract, I’d like to talk to Milano Mas first. But I personally don’t feel a need to distance myself from him or anything, so I’d like to respect his feelings here. Is that alright?”

“Yeah, of course. Just go ahead and handle it how you want. As long as I still get to eat your delicious cooking, then I have no problems,” Yumi said, once more sporting an innocent-looking smile as she accepted her myamuu giba.

Tara let out an excited, “Yay!” too. Then, when she took off running towards the myamuu giba stall, Yumi’s eyes opened wide.

“Huh? You’re planning on buying even more?”

“Yeah! The myamuu giba are for the men from the cloth and pot stores! But me and my dad are having giba burgers!”

“Hmm... You sure are a hard worker, considering how tiny you are.”

After saying that, Yumi seemed to wait for Tara to finish her shopping for some reason, then they headed back south together.

Their skins were different tones, and yet they still somehow looked like sisters. As I saw the two of them off, I thought in the back of my head about how there were just three days left in my initial ten days.

I had initially thought I'd be plenty satisfied if I could sell somewhere between 20 and 30 meals a day, but it had gone so well that we ended up adding a second cart and selling nearly 150 a day.

We had warded off the threat of the Suun clan for the time being, so for now, I just needed to focus on the shop.

There were seven days left until the clan head meeting. If this shop kept on pulling in results till then, then that should make it easier to show the possibility of a bright future for the forest's edge at the meeting.

I won't let things go how the Suun clan wants, no matter what.

With that thought firmly in my heart, I pulled up the leather bag full of giba meat.

5

By the end of that day, we had sold 145 meals in total.

If we had stayed around for another half hour or so, we probably could have sold the remaining five. But I couldn't make light of my agreement with the Ruu clan, so when it was halfway between when the sun hit its peak and sunset, we promptly started preparing to head back.

Incidentally, we ended up selling just 800 grams of the jerky. That only amounted to 12 red coins in earnings, but it only needed salt and meat to make. And so, even without the agreement with The Silver Vase, it still had the potential to be a significant addition to our arsenal.

But at any rate, our business day wrapped up without incident.

I had wanted to talk to Milano Mas about my coming contract, but he was holed up in the kitchen while the only one at the desk was his daughter, who was terrified of the people of the forest's edge. And so, I decided to put that off till later.

Kamyua Yoshu wasn't around either, so for both yesterday and today, I had only seen his apprentice, Leito. Somehow, it felt like my relationship with him was weakening just as I was seeing more and more of the Suun clan.

Was he purposefully avoiding us, taking Donda Ruu's words to heart? Maybe he had some other reason in mind? Or perhaps it was just down to fate? I was no god, so I couldn't even begin to guess.

Well, I guess it's better than him indiscriminately poking his nose into my affairs.

When this thought cropped up, while the trio of myself, Ai Fa, and Vina Ruu were starting to head on back, it put most of my concerns about him to rest.

To start with, we had to stop by the Fa house to grab what we needed. What that meant was: all of the ingredients sleeping away in our pantry, everyday goods like clothing, whetstones, and leather straps, plus the money we had made up till now.

By this point, we had already earned more than 60 white coins. Once we finally hit 100 white coins, we would be able to exchange that for a silver. But until then, we would have to either store away the coins we had or walk around with them.

"We're saying farewell to this house for seven days..." Ai Fa muttered emotionlessly while staring at the now empty pantry.

This was my second time being away from home for an extended period of time, but naturally, this was going to be a fresh experience for Ai Fa.

We shoved as much as possible into the pot, and then whatever didn't fit, Ai Fa dragged along on the pulling board. And with that, feeling a bit like we were moving houses, we headed for the Ruu settlement.

"Ah, welcome home!"

After we handed over our blades we headed towards the kitchen, where we found Rimee and Reina Ruu preparing dinner.

"Ehehe. You're really living at the Ruu settlement, right?!" Rimee Ruu said with a smile directed at me and Ai Fa. She hadn't gotten much of a chance to

hear what was going on yesterday.

“Yeah. We’ll be counting on your kindness for the seven days till the clan head meeting. Are you making hamburgers tonight...?”

“Yup! The two of us have gotten really good at making them! They’re really tasty, so look forward to it!”

Rimee Ruu’s smile was just so bright that I couldn’t help but grin back without even thinking.

After a bit of hesitation, Reina Ruu also looked up from dicing aria and smiled too.

“Welcome to the Ruu house. Will you be working here too, Asuta?”

“Yeah. I’ll be borrowing one of your corners for that,” I replied as I spread out a large amount of meat, vegetables, and fruit wine atop my work station.

My initial plan had been to start purchasing meat from the Ruu clan today, but considering the circumstances, I would instead use up the Fa house’s meat first.

But I was using up over 27 kilos a day, so I should run out by the day after tomorrow. Then, I would buy meat from the Ruu until Ai Fa’s wounds healed.

“Now then...” I started, lifting up my kitchen knife, only for Ai Fa to call out, “Asuta, I’m a bit tired. I believe after I talk to Granny Jiba a bit, I’ll rest in the vacant house until dinner.”

“Got it. Are you alright? Your fever hasn’t come back or anything, right?”

“I’m fine.”

Vina Ruu had already headed back to the house, so that just left me, Rimee, and Reina Ruu. The one other person manning the kitchen, Granny Tito Min, was outside baking poitan.

There was still around an hour and a half till sunset. It was pretty hectic last night in the Ruu house, so I hadn’t been able to finish off my work, but normally I wouldn’t be able to finish before dinner if I started this late anyway. In all likelihood, I’d have to borrow their kitchen for a bit after dinner, too.

Making the patties took the most amount of time, so I was dicing up aria for now for those.

“Ai Fa seemed really down, somehow. Does her arm hurt a lot after all?” Rimee Ruu muttered worriedly as I added the diced aria to the pot and started sauteing.

“I’m not sure. It’s already the third day, so I wouldn’t think it’d hurt that badly anymore. But I’ve never dislocated anything, so I honestly don’t know.”

“Is there going to be a meeting after dinner again tonight...?”

“No, I don’t think there’s anything new that needs discussing today. Ah, were the Rutim informed about how today’s meeting went with Yamiru Suun too?”

“Yeah. Ama Min Rutim was still in the kitchen when Lala and Vina returned, so I think she got told then.”

“Ooh, so she’s still studying cooking here?” I replied, turning to Reina Ruu. To my surprise, though, she had a big grin on her face. “W-What’s up? Did something happen with Ama Min Rutim?”

“Huh? What do you mean?” she questioned with a tilt of her head, but the smile remained plastered on her face. She seriously looked overjoyed.

“Reina, why are you all smiley?” Rimee Ruu questioned, finally addressing the elephant in the room.

Instantly, that smile disappeared and she went beet red.

“I-I was smiling? Sorry, it’s nothing... I was just glad I got to talk to you for the first time in a while, Asuta...”

She said “a while,” but it had only been three days or so.

And when we had parted ways three days ago I had caught a glimpse of her usual innocent self, but with that smile now... She looked earnestly happy, from the depths of her heart.

“Plus, our mother told me all about the clan head meeting. I’m truly glad to have the chance to help you with your work.”

“You’re so lucky! Why am I not allowed to help out, too?! I wanted to go with

all of you...”

“You can’t. There are a lot of violent men in the Suun clan, after all. So you know there’s no way dad would allow it, right?” Reina Ruu’s now serious gaze turned my way. “Asuta, I’ll protect you no matter what. No matter what the Suun clan may be planning, I won’t let them touch so much as a single hair on your head.”

“T-Thanks,” I said, and tried to focus on dicing aria.

Then, Reina Ruu’s expression suddenly shifted again. This time, she looked somehow pained.

“By the way... Just what sort of person is Yamiru Suun of the Suun clan? Vina said she was very suspicious, but also incredibly beautiful...”

“Yamiru Suun? If I had to sum her up in one word, it would be ‘eerie.’ To be perfectly blunt, I find her even creepier than that youngest son of the main Suun house.”

“Really?” Reina Ruu replied, smiling broadly again.

Was I just imagining things, or were her emotions swinging all over the place? And right when Ai Fa left, too...

It hurt before when she was hiding her emotions away too, but still... She sure is a girl of extremes, huh?

Well, I suppose she just had to slowly course correct bit by bit.

After that, I enjoyed some idle chatter with the two of them, then when about half of the cut up meat was left to be handled, we hit our time limit.

When we arrived at the main hall of the house where everyone was gathered, we sat in the same spots as the night prior. For tonight’s dinner, we had hamburgers and baked poitan, soup made with aria, chatchi, and giba meat, and my personal contribution, a kilo of myamuu giba meat alongside the leftover tarapa sauce.

There were no issues at all when it came to the taste of the hamburgers or soup. It seemed the skills of the main Ruu house’s women really were steadily improving day by day.

“What, this is all you had leftover today, Asuta?” Ludo Ruu whined while staring at the large plate of meat coated in tarapa sauce.

“Yeah. I suppose it’s about half as much as yesterday? Sorry it’s such a small amount.”

“There won’t even be enough for everyone, will there? What’ll we do?”

“What a noisy child. In that case, why not just eat what you want? You’re the only one who’ll have an issue with that,” Granny Tito Min chided with an amused smile.

There was an undeniable tension in the air during last night’s dinner, but now that Yamiru Suun had accepted all of our demands without a fuss, that had clearly softened.

Though in the first place, none of the men of the family other than Ludo Ruu would ever crack a smile anyway. Jiza Ruu had been especially quiet lately, and he was rather hard to read to begin with, so I couldn’t help but feel concerned on that front.

“Still, the meat that Asuta shared with us is even more delicious when covered in tarapa sauce than normal meat, isn’t it? I think it would be even better if the flavor was just a little weaker, though,” Jiza Ruu’s wife Sati Lea Ruu gently chimed in.

“That’s true. That meat has been soaked in a marinade made of fruit wine and aria mixed with myamuu. I instructed Sheera Ruu on how to make it, but...” I started to say, but then I remembered something that needed to be mentioned sooner than later, so I turned to Mia Lea Ruu. “Sorry, I know we’re in the middle of dinner, but I still have a bit of work left to do afterwards. Would it be alright to discuss something now, Mia Lea Ruu?”

“Huh? What is it?”

“My shop is coming up on ten days of being open for business. Once that happens I was thinking I would like to take a single day off and have a study session on cooking as prep for the clan head meeting. What do you think?”

“Hmm? Do you mean to teach us cooking methods?”

“Yes. The dish that Mida Suun ate from my stall was called myamuu giba, and I would like to have everyone learn how to make it... It’s not an especially difficult recipe, but I don’t have much free time to spare when I’m working, so I was planning on trying to handle everything on that one day.”

“I don’t especially mind. But in that case, all the women who will be coming along to the clan head meeting will need to free up their schedules, won’t they?”

“I’ll have the whole day open, so I don’t mind if it’s done in groups of a few at a time. It’ll be necessary to let the Rutim women know, too.”

Then, I looked over at Donda Ruu, who was heartily devouring his hamburger dunked in soup.

“Also, considering the time and effort involved, I was thinking of splitting the payment equally among everyone helping out. Is that alright?”

“What did you say...?” Donda Ruu grumbled, a look of annoyance in his eyes. “You’re the one who accepted this ridiculous job from the Suun clan, aren’t you?”

“That’s true, but this isn’t like with the Rutim banquet. Plus, the Ruu and Rutim women also have the secret task of protecting me, so I think they should be paid fairly.”

I got no response.

“Also, the job they’ll be openly doing is already going to be plenty intense, don’t you think? Plus, it’ll be necessary to give the Suun women instruction since they won’t be experienced in such matters, so I believe Mia Lea Ruu’s group will be working just as hard as I will. So in that case, our payment should also be the same.”

Donda Ruu just said, “Do as you please.”

Mia Lea Ruu, meanwhile, gave a strained smile and added, “So distant... Is it the custom of the Fa clan to be that way? Like I said yesterday, the Ruu and Rutim consider you a precious friend, Asuta.”

“I really am grateful to hear that. And I also feel like you people from the Ruu

and Rutim are very precious to me, too,” I honestly stated, even if it was a bit embarrassing. “That’s why I want to have a relationship where we don’t worry about debts... And to face the Suun clan as equals. It’s a bit of a presumptuous way to put it, but I want us to be allies, worrying about the future of the forest’s edge together.”

“That isn’t presumptuous in the least,” Granny Tito Min replied from Mia Lea Ruu’s side. “You may have been born in another nation, but you’re far more splendid a member of the forest’s edge than anyone in the Suun clan. And that’s only become all the more clear with this latest incident.”

“...Thank you, Tito Min Ruu,” I replied, only for Rimee Ruu to let out a sudden, “Ah!”

The contents of Ai Fa’s bowl of soup, which had still been around half full, spilled out over the ground.

Then, Ai Fa’s body started to sway, till I hurriedly supported her shoulders.

“My apologies... I went and wasted this precious food...”

“Ai Fa! You’ve got a fever again, don’t you?!”

I could already tell just from the heat coming off of her shoulders.

Ai Fa, meanwhile, placed her right hand on the floor and frowned, looking a bit pained.

“Shall I lay out the bedding in Jiba’s room...?” Mia Lea Ruu asked, getting up.

“It’s nothing so serious...” Ai Fa managed to wring out. “I have romu leaf on me, so if I just drink that and rest... I’ll recover soon...”

I turned and faced Mia Lea Ruu, supporting Ai Fa’s body all the while.

“Sorry. I know we’re in the middle of dinner, but I’ll be excusing myself for a bit... Rimee Ruu, the romu leaf is in a pocket inside Ai Fa’s cloak. Could you get it out?”

“Yeah!”

“Ai Fa, can you walk?”

“Yes...” Ai Fa said, placing her right arm around my neck.

I grabbed hold of her wrist, supported her waist with my other hand, then stood up as gently as I could.

Reina Ruu was busy assisting Granny Jiba, but now she was looking our way, her face full of complex emotions. This was no time to be paying attention to such matters, though.

“Sorry, but I have to get Ai Fa to somewhere she can rest.”

“That certainly seems prudent. Rimee, crush up the romu leaf and bring it here... Ah, you were still in the middle of eating, weren’t you, Asuta? In that case, we’ll bring over enough for the two of you, so just go ahead and stay with Ai Fa.”

“Right. Thank you.”

With that I headed for the door, lending Ai Fa my shoulder all the while.

She didn’t seem to be in any state to put on her footwear, so I just slipped on my own shoes and stepped outside.

It was then that Ai Fa suddenly collapsed to the ground.

It seemed she didn’t have enough strength left to walk on her own.

“Are you okay? You didn’t seem like you were doing that bad before eating...”

Even as I said that, I intuited the source of this fever: It was probably caused by emotional stress.

Considering everything about how Ai Fa had acted last night, that definitely seemed like a solid guess.

That was why I had hurried a bit in order to get her away from everyone. In all likelihood, Ai Fa wanted to avoid having others see her looking so weakened above all else.

“I’m pathetic, aren’t I...?” Ai Fa muttered weakly.

“That’s not true at all,” I said, wiping the sweat from her forehead with my palm. “You probably caused your fever to resurface by worrying too much about everything while you were injured. You really are bad at using your head, aren’t you?”

Ai Fa broke out in a pout, leaning up against my chest all the while.

“Whatever, let’s just hurry to our temporary lodging... I don’t want Rimee Ruu to see me in such an unsightly state, either...”

“I see. Well then, bear this for just a bit, alright?”

I supported Ai Fa’s back with my left hand and wrapped my right around the back of her knees. Then, with a firm, “ready, go!” in my head, I slowly stood up.

“Hmm, this sure is pretty tricky.”

There was hardly any height difference between me and Ai Fa. Plus, considering the density of her muscles and bones, there probably wasn’t a big weight difference either. And so just by lifting her up like this, I could feel my arms and legs about to start trembling.

“What are you doing...?”

As Ai Fa was resting her head firmly against my shoulder, I had lifted her up and cradled her in my arms, so now she was looking at me with a bit of bewilderment in her eyes.

“What? You wanted to hurry back, right? In that case, I can’t see any other option.”

If her left arm wasn’t injured then a piggyback ride would be easier, but it was only a couple dozen meters between the main Ruu house and the vacant one where we were staying. So I just had to give it my all and manage that far.

And so, I stepped forward carefully, making certain that even if something went wrong, I wouldn’t drop her.

“Doesn’t this just make me look all the more pathetic...?”

“It’s not pathetic. Family helps one another when they’re in trouble, right? Plus, I don’t want to see some other guy cradling you in his arms, no matter what.”

I was quickly sweating up a storm, but even so, I kept on advancing under the light of the moon.

If it weren’t for all the daily manual labor I had done, I may well have ended

up needing a break partway through.

“Rest up properly, and get well soon. I need you, Ai Fa... I’m only able to work my hardest because you’re there for me.”

“I wonder about that... Aren’t you living more like a proper member of the forest’s edge than I am now...?”

“There’s no way that’s true.”

So she was worried about something like that after all, huh?

I had sort of got that feeling ever since last night.

“It’s got nothing to do with the people of the forest’s edge or anything. You’re just bad at relying on others, I figure. But you were able to get through the last two years all on your own, so I don’t think you have anything to feel embarrassed about.”

She didn’t respond.

“I wouldn’t have the strength for something like that. For me, I spent each and every day both relying on others and being relied on like it was only natural... But a while back, someone told me I was bad at relying on family, too.”

I didn’t think there was any contradiction there, though. I think it’s just that because I was that type of person, I became bad at telling the difference between relying on others and taking advantage.

Meanwhile, Ai Fa had a different reason entirely: She was so strong of a person that she worried asking others for help would make her look pathetic.

We were seriously complete opposites, but we may have also actually been a lot alike.

“I’m sure I could never live like you, and I don’t think you could live like me either.”

I was seriously running out of breath, but even so, I still managed to shoot Ai Fa a smile.

“So in that case, we can just keep on living while compensating for what the

other is missing, right? It would make me happier than anything if we could do that for each other.”

“Don’t discuss such bothersome matters when I’m feverish...” Ai Fa said, then she smacked her head into my cheek.

Then she kept on grinding her burning forehead firmly up against me.

“Ow, ow... Anyway, what I was trying to say is that it makes me happy when I can help you out. Sometimes it seems like you don’t need me at all.”

“You really are a complete and utter fool...” Ai Fa muttered, sounding like her consciousness was fading. “I’m the one who needs you... So always...” she drifted off, and I didn’t catch the end of that statement.

And so, in my heart I quietly responded, “I’ll always stay by your side, Ai Fa.”

Chapter 4: The Tenth Day—Fresh Determination

1

At last, the day had arrived.

It was the sixth day of the blue month, our tenth day of business here in the post town.

On the eighth day, we sold 138 meals, and on the ninth it was 142.

That made for a net profit of 1011 red coins.

In terms of giba horns and tusks, that would be roughly 84 heads worth. If the Suun clan was looking to live buried in riches, then it was no surprise I would catch their eyes with numbers like that.

Together, the four of us had earned that sum. In just ten days, we had earned the equivalent of 84 giba. Even if you factored in the value of their pelts, painstakingly skinned and tanned, it would still be the equal of 42 giba. That was the scale our earnings had reached.

Naturally, this business was only possible thanks to the strength of the hunters, and I had no intention of forgetting their efforts. But still, those sure were some crazy numbers. Put another way, the people of the forest's edge could earn this much money from giba meat, but they had been going and knowingly dumping it in the forest.

Looking at it that way, we still hadn't done enough.

Giba meat still had an even higher value to it.

If not just giba cooking but giba meat itself could be exchanged for coins, then at that point, prosperity should truly come to the forest's edge.

That was precisely why I had taken up this challenge in the post town.

"Good morning, Milano Mas."

Ai Fa had recovered now that two days had passed, so she was accompanying

me, Vina, Lala, and Sheera Ruu. And when we arrived at The Kimyuus's Tail, we found Milano Mas already standing there behind the building waiting for us.

He wasn't all that large of a man but he was well built, and his yellowish-brown skin marked him as a pureblooded citizen of Genos. He always had a displeased look on his face, and today was no exception.

"So you're finally here, huh? The guards stopped by the shop earlier."

"Huh?"

"Apparently, more folks from Sym and Jagar than ever have gathered today. This sign may be backfiring, huh?"

"This sign" referred to the small one beneath the sign for the shop itself. I couldn't read it at all, but it should have said, "Closed on the 7th, 10th, and 11th of the blue month."

The plan was to take tomorrow off for the study session, while the 10th was the clan head meeting itself, and then I would need to take the following day off too since I wouldn't have time to prepare for work.

"I mean, I'd be concerned about just taking time off without letting anyone know... Is it really such a big crowd?"

"No clue. And the guards just told me not to worry about it, too."

As he said that, Milano Mas reached into the pocket of his pale black apron. What he pulled out were eight red coins.

When I told him I was taking a break, he said in that case the contract for the myamuu giba stall and space would be temporarily canceled, so he would return the appropriate amount of money. Plus, at any rate, if I was going to keep having two stalls, it made sense to have the days on them match up.

With this, my contract with The Kimyuus's Tail had come to an end for the moment.

The question still remained of what would happen from the day after tomorrow on, but I wasn't able to get a response just yet.

"I'll decide by the time you close up shop for the day. That should be fine, right?"

“Yeah. I don’t mind.”

Still, the way that I couldn’t read how Milano Mas was feeling at all just didn’t sit well with me, somehow.

Milano Mas gave a “Hmph,” then glared at each of us in turn.

“Get going already. If you end up causing another commotion, then that’ll be the end of your shop either way,” he bluntly stated.

Leaving it at that, we followed his advice and headed for our spot.

“He had a nasty air about him, right up till the end. If he hates the people of the forest’s edge that much, then why not wash his hands of us already?” Lala Ruu whispered my way as we pushed the cart along.

“Yeah... But regardless of what’s going on in his head, I guess he wants time to think it over till he feels satisfied.”

Yumi had said Milano Mas’s family or friend or something had been harmed by a person of the forest’s edge. If that was true, just how had he felt while dealing with us up till now?

If he had overcome such feelings of hatred and was able to see us as true and proper business partners, then I wanted to keep cooperating with The Kimyuus’s Tail.

Well at any rate, I’ve got to make it through today first.

No matter how things turned out, it didn’t change what we had to do. This tenth day was a turning point of sorts, but we still just had to work our hardest, the same as always.

However, there was just one point that differed from how things had been up till now. For today, we prepared 80 giba burgers.

When we moved our base of operations from the Fa house to the Ruu settlement, we ended up freeing an extra two hours for Vina Ruu. She used that time to help me with preparations, and as a result we were able to prepare an extra 20 meals.

We had heard a lot of disappointment since announcing that we were taking time off, so I figured maybe we could expect to sell better than ever on the days

before and after. This was a measure taken with that in mind, but it was still anyone's call how it would turn out.

At any rate, as we advanced along the highway, Lala Ruu suddenly let out a "Whoa..."

I looked up, and immediately recognized the reason she had done so. There was a bigger crowd than ever before gathered in front of our space.

In addition to the customers from Sym and Jaguar, there were also plenty of people from the west, with it being hard to tell which of them were onlookers and which ones were there to make a purchase. But at any rate, it was such a big crowd that it nearly blocked off the path through the area. I suppose I could see why the guards weren't going to just keep quiet about this.

"Hey there. You seem even more popular than usual today, don't you?"

When I turned to look, I saw Dora in his usual space with a great big grin. Tara was there too, smiling away.

"But you're not going to sell out first thing in the morning, right? We were planning on taking our time and stopping by later."

"Right. Thank you. Well then... Could I get four tarapa and tino, and 30 aria?"

"Got it. That'll be 12 red coins."

After I shoved the purchased vegetables in a bag, we departed for the front.

"Give it your all, Asuta!" Tara called out from behind, cheering us on as we headed towards the sea of customers.

"Sorry for the wait!"

A cheer of sorts rang out in response to my voice, but then it soon went silent. The customers from Jaguar must have been restraining themselves due to the guards keeping a watchful eye.

It hadn't been that crowded in the morning lately, with 20-30 people lining up at most, but today there were about twice as many there. I was only taking tomorrow off, so I honestly felt so honored to see all these people showing up.

"Please hold on just a moment. We'll be ready to go shortly."

After setting the lit brazier into the stall, we started stirring the tarapa sauce.

We moved the meat steeped in marinade to another bag.

We diced up the tino, and sliced the aria.

By now, everyone was fully accustomed to the routine.

“Don’t you feel sort of excited, somehow...?” Lala Ruu asked, a joyous smile on her face. “This work is so interesting. I definitely like it way better than peeling pelts at home.”

“I see. Well, that’s what matters most.”

“What will you do from the day after tomorrow on? Are you going to have us swap out for other women after all?”

“I don’t know. Personally, it would be a big help to always have the same members around, though.”

For a second Lala Ruu’s face lit up with excitement, but then her expression clouded a bit.

“Um, in that case, do you mean that you don’t want to work with Reina?”

“Huh...?”

“Reina wants to work together with you really badly, you know. But would that just be a pain for you?”

Lala Ruu was staring straight at me, her blue eyes like the ocean.

Had Lala Ruu seen through how me and Reina Ruu felt, thanks to her strong sensitivity and powers of observation?

“That’s not what I meant. It’s just... I sort of thought it would be for the best if I didn’t go and carelessly approach Reina Ruu too much.”

“Is this really something that’ll be solved by not coming near her?”

“Sorry... I honestly don’t know. Maybe I’m just putting off dealing with it.”

“There’s no point in apologizing to me. At any rate, things will end up taking their own course, so why not just handle things how you like?” Lala Ruu said, shooting a wide grin my way at the end that was just like her.

With that I got myself back on track and added some aria into the heated pot.

“We’ll be open for business momentarily! Please line up in groups of five!”

The first batch to show up in front of me were from the construction group, and included Pops and Aldas.

“Good morning. You’re rather early today, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. It doesn’t look like we’ll be able to slip away till the early afternoon once we start working today, so we rushed on over in a hurry. After all, we couldn’t let today slip us by when you’re already taking tomorrow off, right?” Aldas said with a hearty smile, while Pops stood by his side with a dissatisfied look.

“I see. In other words, you’re at fault for taking a day off. When you do that you earn less, don’t you? And we’re only here in Genos for the month, but you’re going and taking three whole days off? Don’t do that again during the blue month. If you need a break, then take it once we’re back in Jagar.”

“Ahaha, sorry about that... I’ll do my best not to let it happen again this month.”

As I replied, I tossed in three kilos of meat.

When the scent of fruit wine and myamuu filled the air, the look on Pops’s face softened ever so slightly.

“Hmm... I can’t get enough of that smell. But you’re closed tomorrow, huh...? Hey, Aldas, just what are we going to eat tomorrow morning?”

“I suppose it’ll have to be the karon wrapped in fuwano that we had been eating before, right? Wasn’t that a favorite of yours, Pops?”

“We already get plenty of karon meat at dinner, though. I want to eat giba meat.”

Then, from his position about a head higher than Pops, Aldas gave a knowing smile.

“Ah, right... Hey, kid, a guy named Naudis may stop by later, so take care of him, alright?”

“Naudis? Is he one of your friends or something?”

“I wouldn’t say that, but well, we’ve known each other for some time. It looks like he’s finally about ready to get up off his backside, too.”

I didn’t get what he meant at all, but I ended up finishing the myamuu giba before I could ask.

“Well then, see you again the day after tomorrow. Don’t go getting sick or taking any more time off, alright?”

“Right. Thank you for your continued business.”

With that, I just had to keep on focusing on making food.

The fifteen I made in advance all sold out in an instant, after all.

“Sorry! Please hold on just a moment!”

We were selling even faster than on the morning of the fifth day, which had been our busiest so far.

I sold right through the next 15 meals too, and the flow of customers only finally came to an end once I sold seven of the next batch.

When I glanced over to see how the giba burger stall was doing, I happened to find Sheera Ruu turning my way too.

“We prepared an extra 20, but we only have five of those left. Should we go ahead and get even more ready?”

“Hmm, let’s wait and see a little longer. I think you’ll be good to start making them once you’re down to three left... Ah, welcome.”

When I finished selling that customer from Sym a meal, we ended up with 52 myamuu giba left and 45 giba burgers. Pretty much no customers from the west had shown their faces yet, but things were still going almost too smoothly.

Plus, over these last three days the number of customers from the west had indeed been growing bit by bit. I believe we actually ended up with over 30 of them yesterday.

Giba meat cooking was slowly but surely penetrating the Genos domain. I’d have to make sure I reported that fact to Gazraan Rutim come tomorrow.

It was then that a cloaked group started coming our way. Naturally, it was The Silver Vase, the group led by Shumiral.

“Welcome! Thanks for your continued business.”

There were exactly ten people in the group from Sym, and as always they split up so that five of them were lined up in front of each stall.

Shumiral was on the rotation for myamuu giba on even days, so he removed his hood as always and gave a polite greeting.

“It is unfortunate, that you are closed, tomorrow. We will come again, the day after.”

“Right. Thank you very much.”

“Asuta, what will you do, about making a purchase...?”

“Ah, yes. I talked to my clan head about it, so I was thinking of stopping over at your shop after work.”

As of yesterday, we had earned over 1000 red coins. That meant it would be 100 white coins, which was finally enough to exchange for a silver.

However, money was meant to be spent. It wasn't as if we were planning to save up for some big purchase, so I asked Ai Fa if it was about time to spend some of it, and she gave her consent.

“I am glad. I will be, in the shop, until sunset,” Shumiral replied, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly.

That alone was enough to show the happiness he was feeling. It really felt like over these last few days, I had built up some serious friendship and trust with Shumiral.

“Well then, I will see you later.”

“Right. See you then.”

Once we were done serving the group, we had sold through a full 40 giba burgers.

After we finished the work to prepare the next batch, we would go ahead and take a break.

“Don’t folks from the east sort of resemble the people of the forest’s edge...?”

“Ah, you think so too, Lala Ruu?”

“Yeah... A long time ago, Granny Jiba told me that the people of the forest’s edge may have been born of mixed blood between the east and south.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yup. Granny Jiba didn’t know any details either, though. Long before the war between Jagar and Sym started, clans exiled from their respective capitals met in the forest, and those were the ancestors of the people of the forest’s edge... Apparently that’s what one legend says.”

“Wow, that’s amazing! I sure do find it easy to get along with folks from both Sym and Jagar. Is that why, I wonder...?”

“Really? In that case, when Granny Jiba and the people from back then were driven from the forest in the south, they should have gone to the east rather than the west, huh?”

“Hmm... But the eastern kingdom uses a different language, right? Plus, the south and east were already enemies by then, so I suppose they had no choice but to rely on the western kingdom, which was friendly with both.”

“Ah, I see... Well, no matter what I have to say about it now, I suppose it won’t change how we live our lives.”

As we had that conversation, they apparently managed to finish preparing the giba burgers.

By this point, I was able to completely leave seasoning the tarapa sauce up to Sheera Ruu.

“Alright, then let’s go ahead and take a break. We just finished our preparations over here too, so do you mind if we go first?”

“That’s fine!”

I grabbed two giba burgers while Lala Ruu chose a myamuu giba with tarapa sauce, and we headed on over to Ai Fa. She looked like she was asleep, but when we had approached within two meters, her eyes shot open and she looked up.

“Were you asleep? Sorry about that. We brought a snack, but do you want to eat?”

“Yeah.”

Ai Fa had completely recovered.

Just to be safe, she had restrained herself and not come to town yesterday or the day before, but by today it had been six days since she had injured her left elbow. The plan was actually to set it free from its bindings tomorrow morning, even.

“I’ll still need some time before I can head into the forest, but I should be fairly recovered by the time of the clan head meeting,” Ai Fa had explained.

There were four more days till then. It really would have been bad to head to the Suun settlement with her left arm in a sling, so I was seriously glad to hear it.

“By the way, you said you were buying something after closing up shop, right? What were you thinking of?” Lala Ruu asked, brimming with curiosity while joyously stuffing her cheeks.

“Um, you see, I was actually planning on buying a cooking knife and an iron tray.”

“Iron tray...?”

“Yeah, that’s right! It’s actually a new item the guy running the pot store got in! It really seems like it’ll be useful to have around!”

“Is that all...?”

“Yeah, that’s all.”

I felt great satisfaction in the idea, but Lala Ruu was shooting me an incredibly bored look.

“Those are both cooking tools, aren’t they...?”

“Yup. But I mean, those alone will end up costing me 33 white coins.”

I had come to the decision with Ai Fa that once we had saved more than 100 white coins, I would spend around half and save the rest. And so, I would

purchase the Sym-made cooking knife for 18 white coins, and the Jagar-made iron tray for 15, adding up to 33 in total.

“Ah, you’re talking about that blade the silver-haired guy from Sym showed you, right? You looked like you really wanted it.”

“Yeah! That’s right!”

“So what about you, Ai Fa...?” Lala Ruu asked, giving up on me as a cooking-obsessed fool and turning towards my clan head.

However, Ai Fa just responded, “I don’t particularly need anything,” while carefully eating away at her miniature giba burger.

“Huh? Nothing?”

“Yes. My blades are still perfectly usable, and we have no lack of medicine or cloth.”

“Then what about banquet clothes, or accessories? You just borrowed Granny Jiba’s old ones last time, didn’t you?”

“I have no intention of using such things in the future.”

“Huh? But I mean, you might be asked to man the stove for a banquet again like last time, right?”

“...I’ll deal with that when it comes,” Ai Fa bluntly answered.

Lala Ruu looked entirely dissatisfied.

“What the heck? It’s like Asuta’s the only one enjoying himself.”

“That’s right. This is the Fa clan’s fortune, so I’d like you to use as much as you want, as the clan head. Even ignoring what we make today, we’ll have 17 white coins left to spend, right?”

“If you want to use them, then use them as you please. And wait... You aren’t buying anything but cooking tools anyway, are you? I won’t tell you to waste it, but you should use it more on whatever you please.”

“Hmm. In that case, I’ll use it on some other odds and ends, I guess,” I replied, only for Ai Fa to repeat, “Use them as you please,” with a look of satisfaction.

“Got it. That’s just what I’ll do, then.”

“Hey, Asuta...” Lala Ruu said, shooting me a rather irked look.

But then, she seemed to see something in my expression and muttered, “Well, whatever...” before tossing the rest of her snack into her mouth.

2

Though we were taking our breaks, the flow of customers hadn’t come to a complete stop. And so, once we were done, we had 34 giba burgers and 38 myamuu giba left.

“We really are selling well today, aren’t we? We may just end up selling out entirely,” Sheera Ruu said with a bright smile, now in charge of the myamuu giba after the break.

“That’s true. Here I thought the day after the break would be when sales would go up. But it looks like it really was the right call to prepare more giba burgers than usual.”

“We have 170 meals in total today, don’t we? Then how many are you planning to prepare for—?” Sheera Ruu started to ask, only for her eyes to shoot wide open.

I hurriedly glanced around, but then when I saw who she was looking at, I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Ah, the members of the main house? They had some shopping to do today, so I asked if they could carry some firewood, too. Did I not mention it to you, Sheera Ruu?”

“No... I hadn’t heard about it...”

What was she so surprised about, though? It was just the second son and daughter of the main Ruu house coming our way down the path.

When they approached, though, I realized the reason for Sheera Ruu’s shock. Darmu Ruu’s face had been all wrapped in bandages, but now he was walking around with it fully exposed for the first time in a while.

“Sorry for the wait. Here’s your firewood,” Reina Ruu said with a smile like a flower, placing the load from her back at the side of the stall.

“Ehehe. I was free, so I decided to come along,” Rimee Ruu chimed in, placing a bundle about half the size down next to Reina Ruu’s.

Then finally, Darmu Ruu silently chucked down a large bundle of three bags worth in total.

On his face was a truly tragic number of scars. I had been worried about what exactly the nature of his injuries was, but with this it was obvious that they were quite severe.

There was a single large, serious-looking sideways scar on his right cheek, running from the side of his nose to under his ear. It was still the color of fresh flesh, and you could clearly see where it had been stitched. His face had already looked vicious, but now it looked even moreso, gaining about 50% more impact.

However, that vicious feel used to come just from the flames in his eyes and the bold expression he wore. Originally, he had been quite handsome... Thinking of it like that made it even more painful to see.

“...What are you staring at, you bastard?” Darmu Ruu questioned, glaring at me with his wolf-like eyes.

He looked like he was about to heap more abuse on me, but before he could, Sheera Ruu jumped in, “Darmu Ruu,” with a bit of urgency in her voice. “Finally, I get a chance to see you... Are your injuries doing alright?”

Darmu Ruu turned her way, looking annoyed.

“The eldest daughter of Shin Ruu’s house, huh...? What do you care about my injuries?”

“I had heard you hadn’t gone into the forest ever since that day, which caused my heart to ache as a member of your clan... And you have my deepest gratitude for saving Shin’s life.”

From what I heard, Darmu Ruu was injured protecting a man from a branch family, but that was Shin Ruu?

Darmu Ruu frowned, looking incredibly displeased.

“It’s only natural to protect your relatives. What are you, an idiot?”

“No. But even so, if you hadn’t saved him we would have lost our clan head.

So please, allow me to thank you.”

With a “Tch,” of his tongue, Darmu Ruu glanced away.

It was then that his gaze landed on Ai Fa behind us, and his eyes narrowed.

“Reina, give me a minute...”

“Huh?”

Reina Ruu’s eyes went wide with surprise, but Darmu Ruu just left her behind and headed towards Ai Fa, detouring around the stall on the way.

I stepped forward without thinking and was about to shout, “Hey, what do you think you’re doing?!” but then a customer from Sym arrived.

“Giba?”

“Ah, yes, this is giba cooking. If you’d like, please go ahead and try a sample.”

Reina and Rimee Ruu nonchalantly distanced themselves from the stalls, observing with great curiosity as the man from Sym tried the sample.

“That stall also sells a giba meat dish. This one uses cooked meat flavored with myamuu and fruit wine, while that one is a bit of a unique dish using tarapa.”

The customer gave a nod, then he headed over towards the giba burger stall.

“That was amazing! There really are townsfolk eating giba meat! He was from the east instead of the west, though!”

“Hey, lower your voice, Rimee. Sorry... We’re interfering with your work, aren’t we? We already finished our business here, so please excuse us.”

“Huh?! I want to talk to Ai Fa, too!”

“You already spent yesterday and the day before talking to her, didn’t you? But in that case, do you want to stay with Ai Fa until we’re done shopping? We’ll come back to pick you up once we’re done.”

“Yeah! Thanks, Reina!”

With that Reina Ruu turned my way with a glowing content smile on her face.

“Sorry about that. Well then, please take care of Rimee. But if she interferes

with your business, don't hesitate to scold her."

"R-Right, got it."

I got the feeling that Reina Ruu was smiling more and more as the days passed.

Honestly, I didn't know if it was alright to feel earnestly happy about that or not.

It was then that Darmu Ruu suddenly returned with a, "Sorry for the wait."

I turned around in a hurry, but Ai Fa was still seated under the tree, looking like nothing at all had occurred.

With one last, "Well then, see you later," the siblings departed.

Unsurprisingly, I was feeling rather anxious.

But the customer from before returned over my way and held out coins, so I couldn't exactly move from the spot right now.

"Thank you! Please hold on just a moment!"

I grabbed hold of a baked poitan, chanting in my head, *Focus on work!* all the while.

Then, a voice suddenly whispered in my ear, so quietly that I could just barely hear it.

"What business did Darmu Ruu have with Ai Fa...?"

"Huh?"

When I turned to look, I found Sheera Ruu looking incredibly depressed as she stared at the ground.

It couldn't be... But then what was that about?

Ah, no, I really shouldn't be trying to tie things together like that.

Still, after I hurriedly prepared the myamuu giba and handed it over to the customer, I called out to the girl by my side, "Rimee Ruu, sorry, but could you go call for Ai Fa?"

"Hmm? Got it!"

Rimee Ruu darted off, her reddish-brown hair fluttering as she went.

As that was happening, some customers from the west approached. They were youths with ivory-white skin, and they looked a bit timid.

“U-Um, two please.”

“Thank you. Hold on just a moment, please.”

If my memory wasn't failing me, these were the youths who shrieked together with me back when that giant totes bird showed up out of nowhere. For some reason or another, they seemed to be coming once every other day.

There was still a bit of time left until the sun hit its peak, so business was going incredibly smoothly.

By the time I finished preparing the orders for those two, Rimee Ruu had dragged Ai Fa on over.

“What is it? Do you need me to buy vegetables?”

“No, we should still be fine on that front. It's just, um... What did Darmu Ruu want with you?”

Ai Fa shot me a very dubious look, tilted her head a bit, and said, “No idea.”

“‘No idea’? But you had some sort of discussion, right?”

“I wouldn't say it was enough to count as a discussion. He just came up and chattered on about something, then he suddenly left.”

“Is it alright if I ask what he said...?”

Ai Fa tilted her head the other way.

“What was it again...? I believe it was something about how he would enter the forest again tomorrow, and how a hunter who couldn't do so was useless. Was he just trying to have a cruel laugh at me because I cannot venture into the forest at the moment?”

“Ahaha. Darmu's just like a little kid.”

Apparently the intensity he gave off had no effect on the women of the Ruu and Fa clans.

Maybe he really was making light of Ai Fa in a disquieting and haughty manner like he did on that night a month back. But just from hearing the story told, it honestly did come across as a bit amusing.

And when you added in Vina Ruu's statement that he still hadn't given up on taking Ai Fa as a bride, it had the feel of an awkward man desperately trying his hardest to approach the woman he liked.

As a result, the expressions on my face and Sheera Ruu's didn't clear up in the least.

"We're almost in the back half... Let's work our hardest, Sheera Ruu."

"Right... Of course," Sheera Ruu said with a big nod, as if trying to cheer herself up.

Then, another customer appeared: my constant regular, Tara.

"Three please, Asuta!"

"Ah, thanks for stopping by again today! You really do come each and every day, don't you?"

"I mean, it's just so yummy that I want to eat it always! I wish you wouldn't take tomorrow off..."

Suddenly, her dark brown eyes caught sight of Rimee Ruu.

"Ah! A girl from the forest's edge!"

Rimee Ruu stared back at Tara, looking taken aback.

Fidgeting a bit all the while, Tara bowed her head and said, "Pleased to meet you..."

Instantly, Rimee Ruu broke out in a smile and energetically replied, "Yeah, you too!"

Seeing that, Tara's usual innocent smile crossed her face.

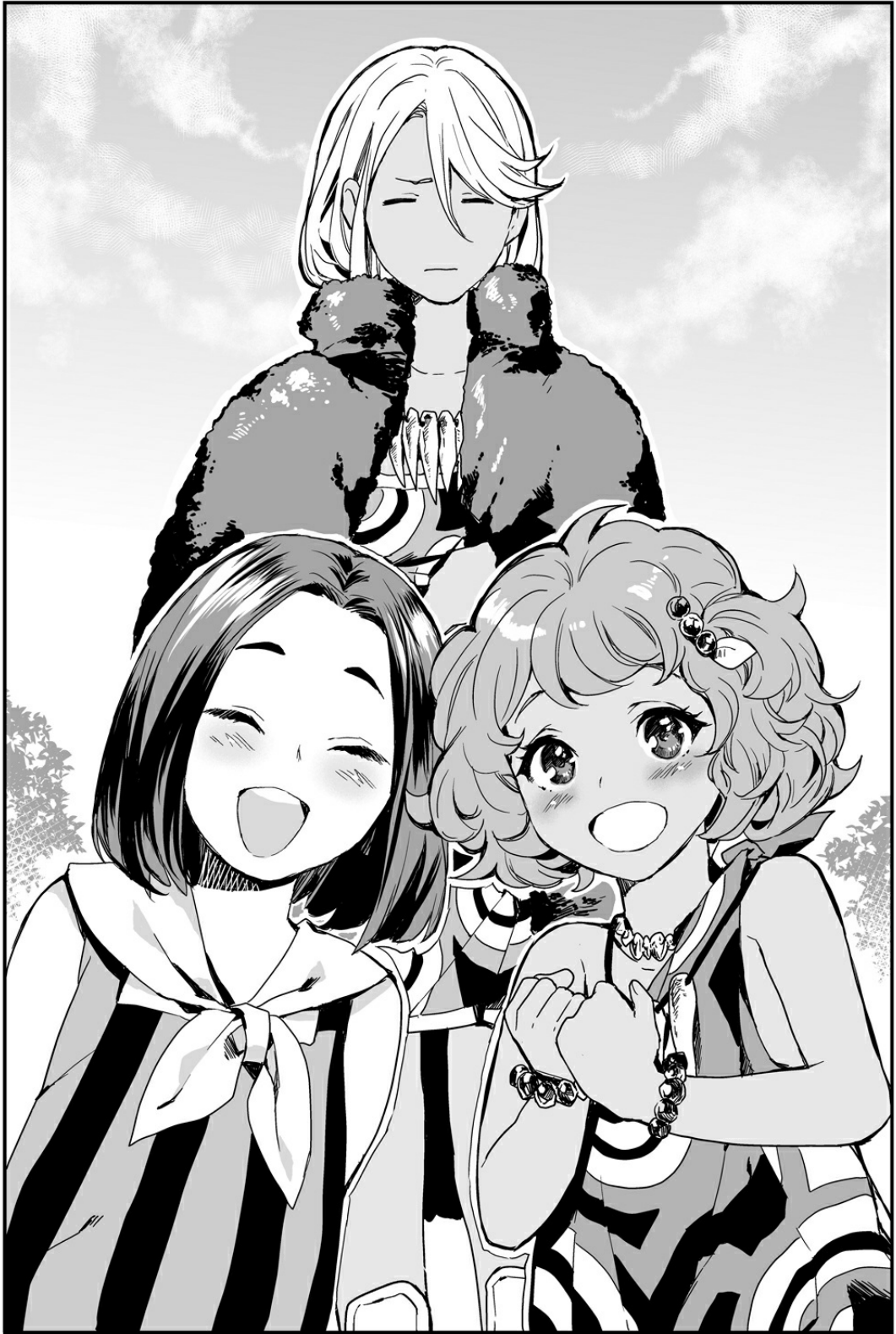
"I thought only adults from the forest's edge ever came to the post town! Ah, my name is Tara."

"I'm Rimee Ruu! I'm still little, so I can't carry heavy stuff, and that's why they don't bring me to town much."

“Really? But you folks from the forest’s edge are so strong! I mean, you’re carrying 200 poitan, aren’t you? That’s amazing!”

It sort of felt like worlds were colliding, but in a peaceful way that was hard to describe.

Ai Fa was standing there right next to Rimee Ruu, but she was averting her gaze, as if she had no idea what to say.



I had to focus on preparing the meat for Tara, though, so I wasn't able to lend my clan head a helping hand.

Instead, I just cheered in my heart, *Give it your all, Ai Fa!*

"How old are you, Rimee Ruu? I'm eight."

"I'm eight too! We're the same!"

"We sure are!"

"So you're from Genos, but you're not scared of the people of the forest's edge?"

"Hmm... Scary people are still scary, but the people around Asuta aren't like that at all! Now that you mention it, I did just see a scary man walking around though..."

"Ahaha. That was probably Darmu! He's my big brother."

"Huh?! Really?! I'm so sorry!"

"Nah, even people from other clans at the forest's edge say he's scary. But he's really not scary at all."

These girls weren't just the same age. They also were alike in terms of height, the lengths of their hair, and overall adorableness. Somehow, just looking at the pair of them caused me to feel more relaxed.

"Those two at the other stall are both Rimee Ruu's big sisters. And Ludo Ruu, the boy you let eat your manju a long time back, is another of her big brothers," I chimed in.

"That's amazing! You have so many siblings! I've got two big brothers, but they're always just working back home."

"I see. Work is definitely important."

"Yeah."

By now, Ai Fa's eyes were begging, "Save me!"

All I could manage with my measly skills was thrusting the now complete myamuu giba in front of Tara.

“Thank you for waiting. That will be six red coins for the three of them.”

“Thanks! Here’s your coins!”

“Thank you! So you aren’t doing two of each today, huh?”

“That’s right! Dad wanted a myamuu giba, but I wanted a giba burger! But then my dad said why not split them, so we can both eat each,” Tara replied, puffing up her chest with pride and giggling.

I questioned how it took them seven days to hit on that idea, but regardless, Tara was just plain adorable.

“Well then, see you later, Asuta! And Rimee Ruu, I’d love to talk some more if we ever see each other again.”

“Yeah! Bye-bye!”

Thus, the chance meeting between the two young girls came to an end.

Ai Fa gave a deep sigh, then rested her right hand on Rimee Ruu’s fluffy hair.

“Rimee Ruu, I’m feeling a bit tired. Is it alright if I rest over there?”

“Yup! I’ve gotta talk plenty with you before Reina and Darmu come back!”

With that, we finally had a moment of silence.

It really had been a hectic day so far.

Well, maybe that’s fitting as the finale to these ten days...

As that thought ran through my head, Yumi approached. For today, she once again had a group of young Genos women with her.

“Hey there. Looks like business is booming again, huh, Asuta?”

“Welcome! Thanks for your continued business!”

“How sad. For today, we’re all getting giba burgers.”

Is that so? I couldn’t say I was especially upset about it.

“Ah, sorry, could you buy mine for me?” Yumi asked one of her friends, then she slid around to the side of the stall.

“Hey, Asuta, what are you going to do about that thing we discussed?”

“Ah, you mean the contract from the day after tomorrow on? Actually, Milano Mas asked if I could wait till the end of my work day today for his answer.”

“What’s that about? Why make you wait that long? Whether it’s fine or not, it shouldn’t be anything for him to be worrying so much over.”

Then, Yumi looked in a completely different direction.

“It just doesn’t feel right. And besides, just what is he standing there like that for?”

“Huh?”

I followed Yumi’s gaze, and when I did, I was surprised to see Milano Mas standing there off to the side of the road.

“Ah... I hadn’t noticed at all. Just how long has he been there?”

Sheera Ruu then quietly chimed in, “Asuta, if you’re talking about the man from the inn, then he’s been there looking at us since before Reina Ruu’s group showed up.”

“Really? Hmm, I wonder what he’s up to...”

“I have no idea. I mean, the fee for the location goes entirely to the folks in the capital, so the folks in charge only make anything off the stall rental fee. But if he was worried about that money then he could just go ahead and form another contract with you, so it shouldn’t be anything to think deeply on.”

As all this was going on, the giba burgers were completed, and Yumi’s friends came back over to deliver hers.

“Ah, thanks. I’ve got a bit more to discuss with this guy, so go eat over there for a bit, alright?”

Unfortunately, though, a new customer arrived just then.

He was from the south... I think?

Ah, no, he had the firm build and tough face of someone from Jagar, but his skin was an ivory white, though a bit on the darker side than usual.

“Ooh, so this is giba meat cooking?”

While his face was intense, he seemed overall like a mild mannered man in

the prime of his life.

His hair and beard were a dark brown, while his eyes were a bright green. Those colors were seen often among people from the south, and he was also only around as tall as Yumi.

“Hmm, I see. And I can taste it?”

“Yes. Please go ahead.”

The man smoothly picked up a chunk of meat with a grigee toothpick, scrutinized it a bit, then tossed it into his wide open mouth.

“Hmm...”

“That stall also serves a giba dish. If you’d like, you can try that one too and compare.”

“Ooh, I see.”

With a bobbing, almost humorous manner of walking, he made his way over to the giba burger stall. As I watched him from behind, Yumi made a bit of a serious face.

“That person... Who is he?”

“Huh? Do you know him?”

“No. But somehow, I feel like I’ve seen his face somewhere before...”

As she bit into her giba burger, Yumi pondered with a “Hmm...” And in the meantime, that man bobbed back on over.

“That dish had kind of a mysterious taste. I’ll have this dish instead.”

“Thank you. One dish is two red coins.”

“Hmm. Two coins for this amount is quite cheap.” As he nodded, he handed over his coins.

I heated back up the meat and aria, then handed him the completed dish.

“Hmm, hmm...” he muttered, giving it one more look over, then he bit into the myamuu giba.

“Oho...”

He showed absolutely no signs of leaving, so I went ahead and asked, “How is it?”

“Incredibly delicious. I’m frankly shocked that this is giba meat. When I heard how much they were praising giba meat cooking, I thought there must be something mixed in to paralyze the tongue or some such trick. But no, this is simply truly delicious.”

“Thank you.”

“Also, the flavoring is simply wonderful. The sweetness of the fruit wine and the spiciness of the myamuu make for an exquisite combination. Who handled this flavoring?”

“I was the one in charge of that.”

“Oh, I see. That certainly is something, for one so young... Still, this fuwano has a bit of an unusual texture. It seems to have come together properly, but it’s quite soft when you bite into it.”

“Ah, that isn’t fuwano, it’s poitan.”

“Huh?” “Eh?”

The eyes of not only that gentleman but also Yumi opened wide with surprise.

“By poitan, you mean those things travelers eat? That can’t be, right? Those just turn into goopy muddy water, don’t they?”

“Ah, no, the batter for this was made by boiling down poitan, then drying it out.”

Now that I thought about it, Kamyua Yoshu had been just as surprised to hear about the poitan as he had been by the giba meat.

“Hmm?” the man muttered, staring even more intently at his partially eaten myamuu giba. “This color really does resemble that of a poitan, but... Do you really mean it? You aren’t just kidding me?”

“That’s right. There is just a bit of gigo mixed in, though.”

Maybe it was best not to bring up poitan, as it seemed to have a bad reputation in an entirely different way than giba meat.

“Poitan is a very cheap ingredient, isn’t it...?”

“Yes. I don’t personally know how expensive fuwano is, though, so I can’t compare.”

“With fuwano, you could make three of these dishes with one red coin.”

“I see. With poitan, you can make around five.”

While letting out a, “Hmm!” the man jammed the rest of the myamuu giba into his mouth.

As that happened, Yumi loudly proclaimed, “Ah! I remembered! You run one of the inns, don’t you? I thought I’d seen your face somewhere from before! It must have been at a meeting!”

“Oho? You didn’t realize until just now? You’re the daughter of The Westerly Wind’s owner, aren’t you? I’m the owner of The Great Southern Tree, Naudis.”

I had heard that name before.

“Ah, so are you acquaintances with Aldas, from the construction group?”

“Yes, that’s right. They all use my inn each year. As you can tell by looking, the blood of the south also runs in my veins, so my place is favored by customers from Jagar.”

I see, so he had mixed blood from the west and south, huh?

Well, Kamyua Yoshu said people of mixed blood didn’t face persecution as long as they weren’t mixes of enemy nations like the north and west or east and south.

“The deliciousness of this shop’s cooking has become a big topic of discussion around my inn. And it really is spectacular. I’m so impressed, I’d take my hat off to you if I was wearing one.”

“T-Thanks.”

“So, what is it...? Are you trying to sign him up to rent out his stalls from your place or something?” Yumi chimed in, sounding a bit amused.

Hearing that, Naudis tilted his head and said, “Oho? This stall came from The Kimyuus’s Tail, didn’t it? Who he rents from doesn’t really make much of a

difference. I simply wanted to discuss something with the owner here.”

“Discuss something...?”

“Yes... If it’s alright, would you be interested in having my place carry your cooking?” Naudis asked, acting entirely mild-mannered all the while.

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“What exactly... do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. I would like to be able to offer your cooking at my inn for dinner. It’s difficult to bring in a chef from the castle town, but if I’m just buying your cooking, then it should be possible to add it to my menu. Ah, my apologies.”

There had been a customer from Sym, standing there silently behind Naudis.

“Welcome. Do you just want one?”

Then, another man from Sym appeared from behind him, looking so similar that they could be twins. The two stood side by side, holding out their two coins.

“Two, is it? Thank you.”

Naudis started stroking his dark brown beard and looking apologetic.

“The sun will hit its peak shortly. I should have come earlier, but I do also have work to take care of for the morning.”

“Ah, of course... In that case, could you hold on just a little bit longer? Once I cook up some extra meat, I should be able to step away from the stall for a bit,” I called out while preparing the myamuu giba, and Naudis replied, “Yes, of course,” and stepped off to the side of the stall.

Yumi followed to the same spot, shooting him a suspicious glare all the while.

“Hey, what do you mean when you say you want to offer Asuta’s cooking? You’re just planning on buying his cooking, then selling that at dinner time?”

“That’s correct. After all, the people of Jagar seem quite fond of it. The customers all keep complaining and saying they want to eat giba meat, which

has led to them being quite displeased with the dinners at my inn. As the owner, I feel quite chagrined over that fact.”

“But if you wanted to turn a profit with it at your inn, you’ll have to raise the price, right? Then nobody will want to buy it.”

“I don’t know about that. If I’m concerned about pure profit, I would certainly have to do just that. But if it was just a bit more expensive than other dishes, I believe I could still expect it to sell to some degree.”

“But then your inn won’t be turning a profit on it, right?”

“It’s true that the earnings from food would drop. But if the number of customers grows, then profit could still go up as a result.”

I stole a sideways glance as I cooked the meat, and saw Naudis’s stern face break out in a gentle expression as he talked with Yumi.

He had the wildness of the south about him, but also the slender build of the west, and his disposition felt rather complex and hard to pin down.

“For example, if I set a giba dish at five red coins, karon at four, and kimyuus at three, I would be able to provide for the customers who wanted to eat it badly enough to pay more. So as long as karon and kimyuus dishes keep selling well enough, I shouldn’t have to worry about profits severely dropping.”

“Hmm... It seems like you’ve properly thought this through.”

“I had to take several days to think it over properly before coming to a decision. I’ve been racking my brains over the matter ever since the night I first heard my customers talking about how delicious this cooking was.”

At that point, the meat finally finished cooking.

“Sorry. I’ll be back soon, so please take care of things,” I said to Sheera Ruu, then moved over towards Naudis. “Sorry for the wait... Thanks to you discussing all that with Ms. Yumi, I was able to sort out my thoughts pretty well.”

“Don’t call me ‘Ms.’ It feels all weird.”

“Sorry. Um... I have preparations and work around the house to take care of too, so I need to return home before dusk. With your proposal, you just wanted my cooking, not me personally, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. If at all possible, I would like something like the dish from the neighboring stall, where it can be served after just heating it up. And in portions enough to serve as dinner rather than just a snack. I would think between thirty and fifty meals would be appropriate to start with.”

“I see. You need something you can sink your teeth into a bit more for dinner... What size were you thinking for one meal, and how much would you be willing to buy it for?”

“Let’s see... I was thinking one and a half times the size of these, for three red coins. Though if you could sell for just a bit cheaper, I would be grateful. I think ten meals for 25 red coins sounds appropriate, but what do you say?”

I ran over the numbers roughly in my head, but as far as I could tell, at the very least it wouldn’t go pulling us into the red.

And in order to accomplish my original goal of spreading the deliciousness of giba meat, this was certainly a promising proposal.

But still, I felt the need to take one step further.

“I’m sorry, but would it be possible for you to tell me the price you pay for karon meat itself...?”

“Karon meat, is it? At my shop, we pay about one red coin per meal’s worth.”

“Huh? So you’re saying that’s the price for one and a half times the amount of meat we use at this stall?”

“Yes, that’s quite right.”

This required more calculations.

My shop used roughly 180 grams of meat. One and a half times that would be 270 grams.

One red coin for that... That meant 100 grams would be 0.37 red coins. That meant the price at wholesale was less than half of what people paid for use in their own homes.

Now that we were on the tenth day, I was finally starting to see the specific numbers at play.

“Let’s see... I’m interested in the idea of selling my dishes, but preparing the poitan takes time, so it may be best if you used fuwano as you have till now. If you do that, I think it would be possible to prepare an extra fifty meals after wrapping up with what’s needed for the stalls.”

“Oho, that would naturally change the price I pay.”

“Yes. I don’t mind if you just go ahead and subtract the cost of the fuwano. If enough for three snack sized meals costs one red coin, then that should mean two dinner sized meals should cost the same.”

Poitan were definitely cheaper, so I would be eating the difference a bit, but it really did take time to prepare them. Thinking of it like that, it didn’t really feel like a loss.

“However, I can’t predict what might happen over the coming months, and it’s also always possible other inns or restaurants could come to me with similar jobs.”

“Yes, of course. That most certainly is a possibility. My inn isn’t the only one that sees frequent use by customers from the south, and there are also a similar number of inns favored by folk from the east,” Naudis calmly stated with a big nod. “And if my shop starts serving giba meat, it’s entirely possible such places will copy me... Actually, I would call that an inevitability, sooner or later.”

“Really? I’m truly honored to hear that. However... My time is limited, so I couldn’t possibly be able to handle all of their requests.”

“That’s certainly true...” Naudis responded, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly.

Perhaps he thought I was trying to use that as an excuse to drag up the price of my cooking.

I was thinking something else entirely, though.

“If that were to occur, I think I would try to offer the possibility of selling just the giba meat rather than my cooking.”

“Huh?!” Naudis and Yumi shouted in unison.

“So I believe it would be a good idea for your Great Southern Tree to also

consider someday moving towards a path where you purchase and cook the giba meat yourselves. In that case, you would also be able to earn a similar amount of profit as with other meats...”

“Hold on a second! If giba cooking ends up getting sold all over, then your shop will do a lot less business, won’t it?!” Yumi questioned while grabbing my arm and looking awfully flustered. “You’d definitely make a better profit just by selling your cooking! Or were you thinking you’d be better off in the business of selling meat...?”

That wasn’t it at all.

As of yesterday, the Fa clan had already run through its supply of meat, and as of today we had to start buying it from the Ruu clan. If I was just thinking of how to best profit the Fa house, then naturally it would be better to only sell my own cooking.

But our goal wasn’t primarily to turn a profit.

And so, I smiled back at Yumi and said, “It would be a little hard to explain, but that path seems more desirable to me.”

“Really? In that case, whatever, I guess...” Yumi trailed off, letting go of my arm but not sounding all that convinced.

Meanwhile, Naudis went, “Hmm... Hmm...” as he stroked his beard. “That’s certainly an interesting thought, but for now, I would be satisfied if you would just start by selling me your cooking. I’ll think about what comes next when the time comes, I believe.”

“Right, thank you. Now then, do you mind if we hammer out the details after I’m done with work? The sun’s about to hit its peak, after all.”

“That’s true. I need to be hurrying back to the inn, too. Also, please make sure you inform the owner of The Kimyuus’s Tail of this matter, too. It wouldn’t be good to have any misunderstandings.”

With that, Naudis bobbed off.

As I watched him leave, Yumi let out a “Tch,” and said, “An inn serving giba meat, huh...? I’d like to try that out at our place too, but we hardly ever get any

customers from the south or east. And with mostly customers from the west, I couldn't imagine we'd be getting many orders for it."

"That's certainly true, at least for now."

For now, there was nothing I could do about that.

A mere ten days wasn't enough to pull the discrimination shown by folks from the west up by its roots.

However, I did manage to score a ton of points with the people of the south and the east.

We had managed to bridge the first gap towards our ultimate goal.

For now, I just had to see whether or not I would succeed in my dealings with The Great Southern Tree.

"Man, now even if you end your contract with The Kimyuus's Tail today, my place won't really have a chance to shine... Well, no matter who you're contracted with, it's not like the taste of your cooking will change, so it's fine," Yumi stated, ending with her usual carefree smile and a slap to my arm. "Okay, my friends are waiting, so I've got to get going too! I'll be looking forward to coming back from the day after tomorrow on, though!"

"Right, thank you."

With that, I said my farewells to Yumi, and finally returned to the stall.

I had left Sheera Ruu to run the myamuu giba stall all on her own, but she had a very gentle smile on her face.

"Welcome back. We now have 26 meals left over here."

"Huh? You sure sold a lot."

"We have 24 left on our end..." Vina Ruu called out from the giba burger stall.

"Added together, that's exactly 50 left... At this rate, it seems like we'll wrap up early sooner or later."

As soon as I said that, yet another group of customers arrived.

It was a group of three rather boorish-looking men with yellowish-brown skin.

“Welcome. Three, right?” I greeted with a smile.

I recognized these customers. Several days ago, they started throwing out complaints in front of the giba burger stall, only for Vina Ruu to handle them and ultimately get them to make a purchase.

That was how things started with them, but by now they were full-on regulars.

“Hmph... Looks like business is booming again today, kid.”

“Yes, fortunately.”

“Geez, just where did I go wrong that I’m paying money for giba meat of all things nowadays?”

It seemed he hadn’t been drinking today, as his speaking was boorish but his expression remained calm.

“Sorry for the wait,” Sheera Ruu said as she offered the completed goods. As he accepted it, one of the men squinted and brought his face in close to mine.

“Man, there sure are a lot of beauties among the people of the forest’s edge. Giba meat’s this delicious and there are beautiful women all around, so I guess it’s not so insane that someone would go and do something as crazy as try to live there.”

“Ahaha. That’s not exactly how it went.”

“If that’s not it, then what was? One of these ladies has got to be your ladylove, right?”

“Ah, no, not at all! A fledgling like me could never try to go and do something so outrageous.”

I glanced over at Sheera Ruu, but she just remained politely expressionless and allowed the customers’ nonsense to float by her.

When the three customers left with their myamuu giba, I breathed a sigh while wiping imagined sweat from my brow.

“They certainly are a rowdy bunch. Sorry about that, Sheera Ruu.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Asuta. Still... A lot of people seem to be

mistaking me for your bride, don't they?"

"Huh? R-Really?"

"Yes. I hear that several times each day. Townsfolk certainly have a strange way of thinking, believing a pathetic woman like me could be your wife."

"Hey, I'm the one who's pathetic here! I mean, the thought of a wonderful woman like you as my wife is... Wah!"

I had been suddenly slapped on the shoulder, causing me to shout out loudly.

When I turned around, I found Ai Fa standing there with numerous aria cradled in her right hand and scowling.

"Don't shout all of a sudden. You shocked me, you know."

"I-I-I'm the one who was shocked! I already told you not to hide your presence and sneak up on me like that, right?!"

"So you're telling me I have to intentionally walk around while making noise? That's just plainly foolish."

Sheera Ruu didn't look shaken in the least despite all that, and she calmly accepted the aria from Ai Fa.

"Thank you... You were busy, Asuta, so I asked Ai Fa to take care of the last bit of shopping a while back."

"T-Thanks for being so considerate. Huh...? Did Rimee Ruu leave already?"

"The Ruu siblings came back to pick her up a while ago. It was while you stepped away from the stall and were absorbed in some sort of conversation," Ai Fa said as she stared at me and Sheera Ruu.

"W-What is it, Ai Fa?"

"No, it's just... Taking another look, I really can see how someone would think that you're husband and wife."

So she really was listening carefully, huh?!

As I racked my brain over how to respond to that, Sheera Ruu smiled and chimed in before me, saying, "I don't think that's true at all. There is no way that Asuta would ever choose me as his bride... And while I trust and respect

him deeply, I could never choose him as my husband.”

“I see...” Ai Fa replied, then suddenly turned around.

Once she was resting in the shade of a tree again, Sheera Ruu whispered apologetically into my ear, “I’m sorry. I said something incredibly rude about you, there... It’s just, I needed to clearly tell Ai Fa how I feel.”

“Yeah, I think you definitely made the right decision... And I have a lot of trust and respect for you too, Sheera Ruu.”

She shot me a brilliant smile, and then promptly faced forwards again. After all, there was another customer approaching.

The sun had finally hit its peak, and there were even more people passing by than usual.

And sure enough, I got the feeling that the number of customers we had from the west was also slowly but steadily increasing.

“Sheera Ruu, there are just 20 giba burgers left... Do you want to change places...?”

“Right,” Sheera Ruu replied and headed over to the giba burger stall, while Vina Ruu took her place.

We had prepared 80 giba burgers, and now we were finally down to the last 20, huh? And there were only 23 myamuu giba left, too.

“It looks like we’ll be selling out for the first time in a while, doesn’t it...? It really is more enjoyable to do that than to have leftovers, isn’t it...?”

The flow of customers showed no sign of stopping, as if in response to Vina Ruu’s statement.

This was the last of our initial ten days, and it was going at an even higher pace than ever before.

We sold one meal after another, and about an hour after the sun hit its peak, we were finally down to the last three myamuu giba.

“Ooh, it seems like we might actually sell out first today,” I happily proclaimed, only for a certain someone to approach: Milano Mas.

“Ah, hello.”

This was the first time Milano Mas had ever approached either of the stalls during business hours.

He stared at the meat left on the plate and gave a snort.

“Once you sell that, you’ll be done, huh? Just how many meals did you prepare today?”

“For this stall we prepared the usual 90, while we went with 80 for the other one.”

“So 170 in total, is it? Geez, that’s a ridiculous number.”

As he said that, Milano Mas held out two red coins.

“Huh? You’re buying one of my meals?”

“Yeah.”

“Thank you. Um... You can try one of these small samples from this plate first to confirm the taste...”

“You sure can talk my ear off. I already held out my coins, so hurry up and sell it to me. I don’t need to try anything first.”

Then, in his usual displeased tone, he added, “This’ll be the last time, after all...”

“‘Last’? What do you—?” I started to ask, but then a man and woman from the west approached.

“See, this is it. The sign says giba, right? This is that giba cooking people have been talking about.”

“Wow, gross... Hey, we should just leave, right...?”

“I thought so at first, too! But weirdly enough, it’s actually super delicious!”

Then, the rather young looking man stood there a little stiffly and held out four red coins.

“Hey, we’ll take two.”

“Right, thank you!”

Added together with the one for Milano Mas, that was enough for us to completely sell out.

I finished up the three dishes, then Vina Ruu handed them over to the customers.

And without saying a single word, Milano Mas started walking down south towards where the bigger crowds were bustling.

“Vina Ruu, please take care of the fire,” I said, then I followed after him.

“Milano Mas, please hold on!”

He showed no signs of stopping. And yet, he didn’t pick up his pace any, so I was able to catch up to him a bit after the giba burger stall.

“Um, what did you mean before, when you said it would be the last time?”

Milano Mas didn’t stop walking as he bit into his myamuu giba. Though, I couldn’t see any change in his expression as he ate.

“What are you getting so worked up over...? You’ll be contracted with The Westerly Wind from the day after tomorrow on, right?”

“Huh...? No, but, about that...”

“Or are you changing over to The Great Southern Tree? At any rate, it doesn’t matter at all who you have a contract with. The stall rental fees amount to nothing more than my daughter’s allowance. I’m not going to whine about it, so go ahead and sign up with a shop that values you highly.”

Milano Mas walked over to the side of the road and then stopped there. A disgruntled glare came my way from a bit lower than my height.

“I hate the people of the forest’s edge. Plus, my daughter’s terrified of you folks, too. I can’t think of a single reason to stop you from going.”

“If you say... that you honestly think it’s better that way, then it’s of course no problem on my end, but...”

But in that case, why didn’t he just tell me so two days back?

And also... Why was he making such a grave face as he ate the myamuu giba, then?

“Even if it just amounts to pocket change, it’s one white coin per rented stall. Just handing that over to another shop is bad business. And I may hate the people of the forest’s edge, but it would be downright stupid to take losses over that. I just took time to mull it over till I was satisfied because that thought was running through my head.”

“So after thinking on it, you decided to yield the contract to another place?”

That was disappointing, but the most important thing was to respect Milano Mas’s feelings.

And yet, Milano Mas just looked down at the partially eaten myamuu giba and muttered, “That’s not exactly it...”

“Huh? Then why?”

“As a businessman, I believe I should keep the contract with you. But I also figure there’s no point in clinging on and causing unpleasant feelings for both of us. After all, there’s no chance of me or my daughter ever forgiving the people of the forest’s edge.” Still looking down, Milano Mas muttered, “My close friend was killed by a person of the forest’s edge. And as a result, my wife also died. That was ten years ago at this point, though... Thanks to that, I’m good with the whole of the forest’s edge dropping dead. I don’t give a damn about what happens to the fields, and the hunters are worth less than dung to me.”

“But that’s...”

“If the folks who went and committed atrocities were judged properly, I wouldn’t keep complaining about it forever. But the people of the forest’s edge are under the lord’s protection, so they can do as they please. My friend fell from a cliff and died, and he was gripping a giba horn and tusk necklace in his hand. And yet, the people of the forest’s edge didn’t face any judgment for it.”

I stealthily gripped my fist.

Yumi had said things ended up unsettled because there was no proof... But there had been evidence. And on top of that, the people of the forest’s edge were never investigated, huh?

My feelings were seriously thrown for a loop, but Milano Mas looked even calmer than usual. What I saw vaguely in his light brown eyes wasn’t anger, but

sadness.

“Then my wife just stayed in bed with worry, until she passed before much longer... The man who died was my friend, but for my wife, he was her precious older brother who raised her in place of their parents. And so, my daughter and I will probably keep on hating the people of the forest’s edge forever.”

“But, that’s...”

Dora had once said that the people of the forest’s edge attacked travelers, stole crops, and kidnapped women. And Ai Fa hadn’t refuted that point, either. It was an absolute certainty folks like that existed at the forest’s edge.

Are the Suun clan behind all of that, though...?

I had no idea.

However, the discord between the Suun and Ruu clans had grown firm 20 years ago, the era of the previous clan head. Back then, the Suun clan kidnapped a woman set to marry into the Ruu clan, then drove her to suicide. So back then, the Suun had already fallen to corruption.

“But still...” I started to say, but I held my tongue.

But still, it wasn’t as if all of the people of the forest’s edge were such villains. I couldn’t stand the thought of Ai Fa, the Ruu, and the Rutim being lumped together with folks like that.

That one weak-looking woman I met just the once also came to mind. The one who introduced herself as Saris Ran Fou, and was cradling a little baby.

The small clans who lacked the strength to hunt the necessary number of giba simply starved to death. Saris Ran Fou had even said that if Ai Fa hadn’t secretly given them pelts, she wouldn’t even be able to produce milk for her baby.

No matter how much edible fruit and the like was growing in the forest, they had to starve themselves rather than let the same happen to the giba. Those people of the forest’s edge died in order to protect their agreement with the lord of Genos, and their pride as hunters.

The prosperity of the Genos domain had been built atop their noble sacrifices. And yet hatred, fear, and contempt swirled around the hearts of the people

living there.

How could such an insane thing possibly be true?

The small fraction of people who committed terrible acts and those who protected them faced no trouble at all, while in both the forest's edge and the post town, the common folk were the ones who had to suffer.

Or to be more precise, the ruling class of Genos and the Suun clan who led the forest's edge were lining each other's pockets, while thrusting the suffering and misfortune on everyone else, right?

"But what? Are you trying to say not all of the people of the forest's edge are fiends?" Milano Mas asked in a low voice. "I know that full well. If every one of the 500 people living at the forest's edge were such monsters, the corpses would be piling up each and every day. Everyone knows that much. Otherwise, do you think I ever would have done business with you?"

With that, Milano Mas tossed the rest of his myamuu giba into his mouth.

"Plus, us townsfolk aren't idiots. If you were that vile, nobody would ever buy your cooking... So while I have no intention of stopping you, I'm not trying to drive you away either. But the Great Southern Tree and The Westerly Wind would value you a lot more, so there's not a single reason for you to stay with my place, right?"

"Ah, no... If you don't want to drive me off, then I'd like to keep working with The Kimyuus's Tail."

"What?" Milano Mas questioned, his eyes opening wide. "Why? You don't get anything from doing that, right?"

"I mean, I don't really know how to answer that... I guess because it made me really glad that you ate my cooking."

Plus, Milano Mas spent three days worrying about the matter, trying to sort out his feelings. And on top of that, he ended up deciding he neither wanted to stop me nor drive me away. And so, I couldn't see any reason to leave The Kimyuus's Tail.

"As a fledgling shop owner, I'm sure I'll come up short in all sorts of ways, but

I intend to keep giving it my all, so I hope to keep working with you.”

With that, I took off my towel and bowed my head.

“...You really are a baffling kid,” Milano Mas muttered with a sigh. “This is nothing to go bowing your head over. If you’re fond enough of unpleasantness that you want to pay for it, then do as you wish.”

“Right! Thank you!”

By the time I lifted my head, Milano Mas already had his back to me and was walking away again.

With that, I put the towel back on and hurried to return to the stall.

And yet, there were still restless feelings swirling around in my chest.

Since it was ten years ago, Diga and Yamiru Suun would have been too young to be involved. But was someone from the Suun clan the culprit after all?

I had no idea what the truth was.

But still, it would be impossible to bridge the gap between the people of Genos and the forest’s edge while such a criminal was still at large, right?

And even if our shop acted to bridge that gap, and most of the people around started eating giba meat without any worries... That still wouldn’t be enough to clear up the regrets of those who had been harmed directly, like Milano Mas.

The criminal had to be brought to justice. That much was completely obvious, but as long as it wasn’t carried out, mutual understanding would be truly impossible.

But just what should be done, then...? I vaguely worried as I returned to the stall.

And when I made it back, I spied a blond, spindly man standing in front of the giba burger stall.

“Hey there. Looks like I made it over for the first time in a while.”

It was Kamyua Yoshu, of course. And standing by his side was the flaxen-haired youth who served as his apprentice.

“It really has been a while, Kamyua Yoshu. I’m glad to see you doing well,” I

said with a light bow as I headed into the stall.

Suddenly, Lala Ruu shot me a smile.

“These guys were the last ones. We sold all of the giba burgers, too!”

Only a bit over an hour since the sun hit its peak, we had sold all 170 of the meals we had prepared.

4

Our ten day long battle had come to an end. However, there was no time to relax.

We still had to finish cleaning up the stand, stock up on supplies for the day after tomorrow, and make arrangements with The Great Southern Tree, then make it safely back to the forest’s edge before our work for the day was done.

“So you sold 170 meals today? Man, that sure is something. And it was people of the forest’s edge selling giba meat at that! It’s no exaggeration to call that a great achievement sure to go down in the annals of history,” Kamyua Yoshu proclaimed as he stood there watching us clean up.

I figured since he was actually sticking around maybe we should handle our business with him too, so I called Ai Fa over from the shade under the trees.

When she silently stood by my side, Kamyua Yoshu said, “Hey there,” with a big smile. “So you’re here in town today too, huh, Ai Fa?! I’d been wanting to see you since I heard from Leito, but I’ve been so busy lately I couldn’t make it over.”

“...I can’t say I’ve had much to do, though,” Ai Fa coldly replied.

Kamyua Yoshu, meanwhile, looked her up and down and said, “I’m just glad to see you looking well.”

Ai Fa was hiding her injured left arm under her cloak as always, but I figured it probably wasn’t possible to fool him.

“Ai Fa, the coins.”

“Right,” Ai Fa nodded. Taking care not to open her cloak too wide, she pulled

out a heavy cloth bag.

It was everything I had earned up till yesterday with the shop.

As I accepted it from Ai Fa, I ran through the calculations in my head.

“Hmm, we sold all the meals today and four chunks of jerky, so... twelve and nine, then?”

By that, I meant twelve white coins and nine red ones. I moved that much into a separate bag, and held it out towards Kamyua Yoshu.

“Hmm...?” he questioned, tilting his head.

“It’s your reward money. The net profit for these ten days came out to 129 white coins, so this is ten percent of that.”

“H-Hold on a moment. What do you mean, reward money? I can’t see any reason for you to be giving me this.”

Now, it was my turn to be astounded.

“What are you saying? Your reward money was supposed to be ten percent of our profit after subtracting expenses. You’re not saying you’ve forgotten, are you?”

“I did. Or actually, did I seriously say that in the first place?!” Kamyua Yoshu questioned, clearly a bit flustered.

Leito looked up at him and chuckled, then stated, “I remember it clearly as well. You were the one to decide on that number, Kamyua. I’m sure you meant it as a joke or something, though.”

“Huh? Seriously? Man, I’m at a loss. I don’t remember that at all... At any rate, even if I did say it, like Leito said I must have meant it as a joke. Put those back where they came from, Asuta.”

“I can’t do that. Without your advice, we never would have earned all this money, so this is your just reward. Please accept it.”

“No, but...”

“It would be a problem for me if you turn it down. I don’t want there to be debts between us,” I said, thrusting the bag towards him again. “Whether you

become a friend worthy of respect or an unforgivable traitor, neither of us should owe the other anything. Please, take our feelings into consideration and accept it.”

Kamyua Yoshu gave a deep sigh, looked back and forth between me and Ai Fa, then incredibly reluctantly reached out with his long, slender arm.

“Got it. I’ll accept this money as a sort of initiation, to earn the right to stand equally as friends... Still, it’s a waste. When you give me money, it all just gets spent on frivolous stuff.”

“If that’s what you think, then treat it more carefully,” Leito retorted.

“However, it’s just this once, alright? Got it, Asuta, and Ai Fa? This is the only time I’ll take your reward money! Treat the rest of your earnings from now on as the precious Fa clan fortune.”

“Understood. And thank you.”

I gave an earnest bow, while Ai Fa thanked him with her eyes alone.

“Geez, good grief... Well then, I’ll be returning to the inn. Since you’re off tomorrow, I suppose the soonest we’ll next meet will be the day after.”

“That’s right. We’ll be awaiting your next visit to our shop.”

“Yeah, and I’ll be looking forward to my next chance to eat your cooking. Ah, right... There was one last thing I wanted to ask.”

“Yes?”

“Are you facing any trouble at the moment that I could help you out with?”

I silently looked up, following along Kamyua Yoshu’s slender frame. In all likelihood, Ai Fa was doing the same.

Kamyua Yoshu, meanwhile, narrowed his eyes and smiled. Those mysterious purple eyes, which looked at once like they belonged to an infant and an old man...

Not yet... I thought, forcing down the turbulent emotions I was feeling inside.

We couldn’t rely on Kamyua Yoshu at this stage.

After all, he had ties to the lord of Genos, so if I were to get him involved

when I hardly knew anything definite about him... That really could lead to a fatal collapse of the relationship between the forest's edge and Genos.

And so, I schooled my expression to be as aloof as Kamyua Yoshu's, then shook my head.

"...We haven't had any such issues arise as of yet."

In response, Kamyua Yoshu shot me another wide grin.

"That's certainly good to hear. Well then, see you the day after tomorrow! And to you beautiful ladies of the Ruu clan, good work!"

As Kamyua Yoshu and Leito disappeared into the crowd, I breathed a sigh of relief.

It was then that Lala Ruu called out, "Hey!" from behind. "Are you done talking? We already finished cleaning up a while ago."

"Ah, sorry about that! Lala, Vina, Sheera Ruu, seriously, good work today. Thanks to you all, we didn't just make it through today, but all of these first ten days."

When I said that, all three of them broke out in carefree smiles.

"What are you being so formal about? We're taking tomorrow off, but this isn't the end of our work, right?"

"I'd like to keep working with you from the day after tomorrow on..."

"That's for sure. I sincerely feel the same."

I may have been inexperienced, but I somehow made it through ten days, so I was earnestly smiling too.

In those ten days, we managed to sell over a thousand meals. In terms of total earnings, we made more than 2000 red coins. Even after subtracting expenses and what we gave Kamyua Yoshu to get our pure profit, we made 1169 red coins. Shifting that into giba horns and tusks, it equalled 97 giba's worth.

We had also earned a decent number of customers from the west by now, too.

And in addition to the stalls, I also managed to sell my cooking to an inn, too.

If we could just do something about the Suun clan, then I'd say we could take a firm step towards our goal.

"What is it, Asuta...?" Ai Fa asked, looking just a bit angry as she approached. "If you're worrying about something, don't bundle it up and hide it inside. Talk to me."

"Of course, I will. But it's not such a simple matter... Can we hold off and discuss it at night so we can take our time?"

Ai Fa stared silently at me for a moment, but then she stepped back and muttered, "Alright."

"Well then, let's head on back!"

With that, we headed down the stone highway while pushing the two stalls. At the moment, the crowds were definitely at their peak. When we passed familiar faces, they generally called out to us with a, "Good work." But of course, there were still people who shot us looks full of fear and disgust, too. I suppose the ones who just stood there and stared were travellers who only just arrived in Genos today. At any rate, I steadily walked along while taking in such sights.

"Hey there. Are you done already? This is the first time in a while that you've wrapped up early, isn't it?" Dora called out with a grin as we passed by him.

Tara was next to him smiling away, too. They looked just like when I saw them in the morning.

Thinking about it, they really were my shop's first customers. Then the members of The Silver Vase came around, and I met Pops and Aldas and the rest, and Shumiral, Yumi, and Naudis, until I finally made it to today.

As I held that thought dear in my heart, I smiled back at the two of them.

"Yeah, business was really booming today. Could I stop by to buy the vegetables for the day after tomorrow later?"

"Sure, I'll be waiting."

It had only been a mere ten days, but my everyday life had shifted this much. And to be blunt, I didn't want anyone to destroy what I had now.

As we kept pushing the stalls along, Lala Ruu soon said, “Ah, right. You have more than just vegetables to buy, don’t you? We’ll take the stalls back, so why not take care of that now?”

“Huh?” I turned and questioned, and found Lala Ruu with a seriously cheeky grin on her face.

I sure felt like she got me, but I went and replied, “Right. I’ve got to stop by The Great Southern Tree, and I guess I should take care of my personal shopping too.”

“Right. Well then, Ai Fa, take care of Asuta, alright?”

Ai Fa and I stopped in place, and we watched as the two stalls disappeared into the crowd.

“A cooking knife and iron tray, is it...?”

“Yeah. The iron tray will be heavy, so let’s save that for later and go buy the knife first.”

I already handled my preliminary investigation yesterday. The Silver Vase’s shop was right in the middle of the stalls, next to Granny Mishil’s vegetable store.

There was a large jet black cloth spread out over two shops’ worth of space, and it had assorted goods laid out atop it. Thanks to the leather roof stretched out over the vast space, it was just a bit dim inside.

Inside the shop, there were three folks from Sym.

“Pardon me. Huh...? Is Shumiral not around?”

All of the salesmen had their hoods down, but I couldn’t spy any long silver hair.

One especially tall man from Sym joined his fingers together in a mysterious manner, then bowed to me and Ai Fa.

“Shumiral, had business. He will be back, soon.”

“I see. He was supposed to have set aside some things for me. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

“Shumiral has, those items... Please wait.”

Since that was what he was saying, we just had to wait.

And so Ai Fa and I kneeled down and looked over the goods lined out on the cloth.

“This shop seems to sell nothing but unusual items, doesn’t it...?” Ai Fa stealthily whispered to me.

Well, it was no surprise she would say that considering the lineup of goods.

More than the items themselves just being odd, the way they were displayed was just too disorderly. In addition to blades made using precious Sym metal, there were also pots and jars of various shapes and sizes, delicately adorned wooden boxes, an excessively ornamental bow and arrow, shining silver accessories, overly extravagant bundles of cloth... Each and every one of them looked high class, but they were just wildly laid out with no rhyme or reason.

Still, maybe it was more flavorful this way than if it was lined up carefully. In terms of overall feel, it was a lot like an antique shop at a flea market.

“Ah, isn’t this a woman’s banquet outfit?” I questioned, spying a bundled up iridescent veil in the dim light. “These metal accessories are a lot like the ones worn by the Ruu women. Were those all from Sym, too?”

“I don’t have a use for any of them,” Ai Fa bluntly muttered, but then her eyes went wide and she said, “Ah, Asuta, what is this?”

“Ooh, it’s... A wine cup, I guess?”

From the shape, there was no mistake it was some kind of container. However, it was made out of transparent glass.

“So there’s glass in this world too, huh? That really is a surprise.”

“So it’s called glass? It certainly is pretty.”

Ooh, Ai Fa’s eyes were sparkling with an excited light.

“The glass, wine cup, is five white coins,” the young man from before said in a reserved tone.

“So it really is glass... Ai Fa, apparently it costs five coins.”

“Hmm? It certainly is pretty, but I don’t need it to drink fruit wine.”

Even so, the fingers on her right hand swept across the wine cup, with the gleam lingering in her eyes.

It wasn’t enough for her to want to buy it, but I still felt glad to see her express such clear interest in something.

It was then that Shumiral returned.

“Asuta, my apologies. Did you wait long?”

“Not at all. We only just arrived.”

I stood up and faced Shumiral, but Ai Fa kept on staring at the wine cup like a child. I nonchalantly took a few steps away from her.

“We’re done with the shop for now, so I was thinking I’d buy what we discussed.”

“Yes. That makes me glad,” Shumiral said with a nod, reaching into his cloak.

His black eyes suddenly looked at me.

“The blade, is 18, white coins.”

“Right. Thank you.”

“The stone, is 10, white coins. Do you wish, to buy it...?”

“Yes. I’d like to buy that one, too.”

Shumiral happily narrowed his eyes, then pulled out the items from his cloak and held them out.

“Together, it will be, 28 white coins.”

Then, he glanced at Ai Fa, who was still kneeling down.

“She is, a very beautiful woman. Is she, your wife, Asuta?”

“No... But she is the most important woman in my life.”

“I see,” Shumiral responded with a nod as I took the merchandise, then I handed him my 28 coins. “I’ll be using this knife starting from the day after tomorrow in my cooking.”

The vegetable knife was held in a black leather sheath. This would surely play a big role in my cooking, even with stuff like dicing tino in the stall.

“I’m honored... and I am grateful, to Sym and Selva, that I met you.”

“I feel the same way. It’s already the sixth day of the blue month, but I look forward to continuing to see you in the future,” I said with a smile that came from the depths of my heart, while Shumiral happily narrowed his eyes. “Well then, I’ve still got some other shopping to do, so I’ll have to excuse myself for today.”

“Right. I look forward, to the day after tomorrow.”

With that, Shumiral headed back into the shop while I nudged Ai Fa’s shoulder.

“Sorry for the wait. I’m done shopping here.”

“Hmm? Ah, I see.”

Ai Fa then stood up, and we left The Silver Vase’s shop together.

She stared at my hands, her eyes full of curiosity.

“So that knife cost 18 white coins, did it? It must have a splendid cut.”

“Yeah. I think it wouldn’t even lose out to my current cooking knife when it comes to vegetables.”

Then, Ai Fa broke out in an indescribably gentle smile and said, “In that case, it really must be quite a wonderful blade.”

I replied “Yeah,” with a nod, then walked over into the space between stalls.

I stopped there and looked right at Ai Fa.

“And also... Like I said I would earlier in the day, I also bought something completely unrelated to cooking.”

“Oh? What did you buy?”

The gentle expression remained fixed on Ai Fa’s face.

Just what sort of look would she have in a few seconds, though? As I firmed up my resolve in spite of that thought, I held out the item I had hidden in my

hand towards Ai Fa.

“What is this...?” Ai Fa questioned, squinting at it.

What I was holding in my right hand was a pendant with a blue stone.

The stone was only just about the size of my thumbnail and was embedded in a silver disk, which dangled from a completely woven leather strap, so it could be hung from your neck.

“Well, as you can see, it’s a necklace.”

“A necklace... A necklace, is it...?”

Something clearly distinct from the calm from before was now clearly simmering in Ai Fa’s eyes.

“Are you saying you wish to adorn yourself like a woman, Asuta...?”

“No... I bought this for you, Ai Fa.”

“Oh?” Ai Fa responded, her eyes narrowing. “In other words... You haven’t been listening to a word I’ve said, have you?”

“That’s not true. I’ve been listening carefully. You said you would beat me to a pulp if I bought you jewelry and the like.”

“Yes, that’s exactly right,” Ai Fa replied, quietly glaring at me.

I silently gulped down my saliva, then I continued on, “But before you do that, let me just say one thing. This is a charm to ward off disaster.”

“Ward off disaster...?”

“Yeah. It’s apparently a charm from Sym that wards off all sorts of dangers. And considering they’re selling it in a town in the west, it doesn’t matter at all what god you worship. Apparently both men and women wear charms like this in Sym to protect themselves from disaster.”

There was no shift in the look in Ai Fa’s eyes.

Well, I had already prepared myself to take a blow or two.

“I have no idea how effective it may be, but I knew you would get angry with ordinary accessories, and you said you weren’t lacking in any daily necessities.

But even so, I wanted to buy you something, so I used my own judgment to pick it out... It's a charm, but it's a really pretty stone, right?"

The stone was small, but it was a very deep blue.

When Shumiral showed it to me yesterday, I pretty much fell for it at first sight. After all, the stone was pretty much the exact same color as Ai Fa's eyes.

"...How much did you spend on that charm?"

"Ten white coins."

"Ten white coins..."

I could see all sorts of emotions flickering behind Ai Fa's half closed eyelids.

"I know it may not be your style to rely on a charm like this. But I mean, you really are living a dangerous enough lifestyle that your recent injury could always happen again. I just wanted to give you something, like how men of the forest's edge give their family three horns and tusks in the hopes that they live healthy lives."

As I said that, I made a loop out of the leather string of the necklace.

"If you don't like that, then you can go ahead and beat me to a pulp later. But won't you please accept this? It's a gift from your clan member, praying for your health."

Ai Fa closed her eyes for a moment, then gave a deep sigh.

Then, she glared straight at me again.

"...Men of the forest's edge hunt giba themselves, then give those tusks and horns to their family."

"Right."

"In that case, it's not wrong for you to use the coins made through your work in the post town to buy a gift for your family... Or at least, I suppose that's how I see it."

"I-I'm really glad to hear you say that."

"Hmph..." Ai Fa mumbled with a pout. "I somehow feel as if I caught my leg in a trap meant for a giba or something. I wasn't fooled by my clan member's

scheme, was I?”

“That’s not it at all. Or at least, I earnestly don’t want you to be exposed to any sort of disaster.”

Ai Fa gave another, “Hmph,” and took one step closer to me.

Then, she slightly bowed her head.

“...What are you doing?”

“Huh?”

“It’s the custom of the forest’s edge that a gift be granted by hand, isn’t it?”

“I hadn’t learned that one yet.”

As I said that, I placed the pendant with the blue stone around Ai Fa’s neck. It hung just a bit above her necklace of horns and tusks, sparkling away.

Ai Fa scooped it up in the palm of her right hand and stared at it for a bit, and then suddenly lifted her face like she remembered something.



“Ah, I have something to give you, too.”

“Huh? For me?”

“Yes,” Ai Fa said, her hand circling around her back.

With a bit of difficulty, she pulled a necklace with ten horns and tusks on it out of her cloak with her right hand alone.

“Ah... The necklace I entrusted to you, right?”

“Yes. I think we’re well past the point of needing to worry about having to use these horns and tusks. You’ve carried your work out more than well enough to wear it,” Ai Fa said, then she kicked me in the leg. “Bow your head.”

“Um... Weren’t your words and leg in the wrong order, there?” I complained, but I followed her instruction.

With just her right hand, Ai Fa skillfully took off the necklace I was wearing and solemnly replaced it with my old one.

It held the ten blessings I had received from the Ruu clan. I had promised that if my business in the post town failed, I would use it to recoup some of those losses.

“It will surely take a while still to bring prosperity to the forest’s edge, but I’m certain you will see that task through.”

“It’s not just my task. It’s both of our’s.”

“Right... And it belongs to the Ruu and Rutim, too.”

Ai Fa suddenly cast her gaze downwards. There was no longer any anguish showing on her face, but she appeared to be trying to hide the somewhat childish concern she seemed to be feeling.

“And ultimately, it’s a task for all of the people of the forest’s edge,” I said, shooting a smile her way.

“From today on, I’ll be buying meat from the Ruu clan. And sooner or later that won’t be enough either, so we may have to buy from the Rutim, too... And if it becomes so big that not just cooked meals but raw giba meat itself can be sold, then everyone can compete to sell it regardless of which clan they’re

under. Thinking of it like that, it's like we've just started on the task one step quicker than everyone else."

And I felt that in order to carve the path to that future, the people of the forest's edge would need to stand up in unison and strive for it. They needed to fight against the current unforgivable state of the forest's edge, where the clan that was supposed to lead the people were instead the ones sullyng their honor.

"Right..." Ai Fa replied with her eyes still cast downward, then scooped up the blue stone dangling from her neck.

"What is it? Did you decide I deserved a beating after all?"

"No... But even if it's a charm, it's still an accessory. It just doesn't feel right for me to be wearing such a thing."

"I see... But still, it's a pretty stone, right?"

Ai Fa slowly lifted her face. Then, she smiled wide like a small child.

"Yes. It's very pretty, the way that it sparkles."

It was such an innocent smile that I ended up forgetting to breath for a second.

Our work was only just getting started, and there was still a mountain of problems left to tackle... But even so, Ai Fa's smile brought me an incomparable amount of satisfaction and relief.

With that, the curtain finally closed on the first act of our battle in the post town.

Intermezzo: The One in Charge of the Ruu Branch Family's Stove

Sheera Ruu had a weak constitution by nature.

She was prone to sickness as a child, and she was smaller than other children her age. Perhaps that was what led to her becoming so timid, too.

To the people of the forest's edge, strength was of great importance. Even as a woman, a certain degree of stamina and arm strength was essential to properly carry out work around the house. And as someone who couldn't carry out her work as well as most, she felt just plain pathetic.

Naturally, she wasn't persecuted just because she was weak. She didn't know how it was in other clans, but at the very least, no one was that cruel in the Ruu settlement.

That didn't stop her self-condemnation from growing ever stronger, though. Contrary to what one might expect, it made her feel even more sorry, how no one scolded her or got angry over the fact that she wasn't as useful as everyone else.

It took her several times longer than others to chop wood or skin pelts. In fact, she wasn't even able to draw water on her own. And there were plenty of healthy women in the well-off Ruu settlement, making Sheera Ruu thoroughly aware of her own faults.

The one job that Sheera Ruu did enjoy, though, was manning the stove. That task didn't require all that much strength. Thanks to all of that, Sheera Ruu grew up feeling more at ease in the kitchen than anywhere else.

In a way it was fortunate that Sheera Ruu was the eldest child but had three younger brothers, so she could leave a fair bit of the manual labor up to them. Furthermore, her mother Tari Ruu was a small woman but very strong, so she made up for Sheera Ruu's shortcomings in order to allow her daughter to immerse herself in manning the stove.

Since her family helped her out so much, she felt that the least she could do was give her all in the kitchen. Just chopping meat and vegetables and heating them up was enough to man the stove, but there were numerous tricks that could be done in ways that weren't necessarily visible.

For example, meat was easier to eat if you cut it along the tendons. If ari were heated too long they got mushy, but if you heated them too little they had a sharp taste and remained hard. And so, she enjoyed experimenting as she cooked, seeing how strong of a flame she should use and how long she should cook it for.

Naturally, those tricks never got across to her family. No matter how she did it, her family looked satisfied as they ate, which was also what was expected of the people of the forest's edge. It wasn't permitted for any of them to complain about taste.

And so, the tricks she used while manning the stove provided nothing but personal satisfaction. But even so, she felt earnestly happy when her mother Tari Ruu praised her skills.

"When it comes to manning the stove, nobody could possibly beat you. Could you teach me about adjusting the flame again?"

Tari Ruu must have said that because she saw the guilt that her daughter was feeling. And yet, it still made Sheera Ruu happy to hear.

After that, the mother and daughter pair experimented with all sorts of cooking tricks.

There were also some people that Sheera Ruu secretly admired: the four daughters of the main Ruu house.

They possessed the sort of strength and brilliance that you would expect from members of the main house of the Ruu clan, which had over 100 members to its name.

The eldest daughter, Vina Ruu, was an incredibly beautiful woman. And she had wonderful charm as a woman not just on the outside but on the inside too, so the number of men wanting to marry her was endless.

The next daughter, Reina Ruu, was also quite a beauty. She was

overshadowed by her older sister, as she was on the short side and had a bit of a childish appearance, but her charm was no less. And unlike Vina Ruu, who was hard to get a read on what she was thinking, Reina Ruu was very bright and kind, and she seemed like the ideal woman of the forest's edge.

The third daughter, Lala Ruu, was still just 12 years old, so she was more than a little blunt with her emotions. However, she had a side to her that was even wiser and more full of affection than her older sisters, too. Sheera Ruu's little brother Shin Ruu was friends with her, so she was the one she had the most contact with. Thanks to that, she got to know the girl's true nature surprisingly quickly.

The youngest daughter, Rimee Ruu, was an innocent, adorable eight year old girl. You just naturally broke out in a smile when you saw her, as she was so endlessly charming. Sheera Ruu couldn't help but think how blessed she would feel if such a girl were her younger sister or daughter.

Sheera Ruu truly admired those girls.

They were so far above her that she didn't even feel jealous of them, either. In fact, she even felt proud of the fact that they were her relatives.

However, sometimes she would have her doubts.

Why was she the way that she was?

They were especially closely related, even for relatives. Her dad Ryada Ruu was the younger brother of their father, Donda Ruu.

Ryada Ruu was a splendid hunter, and her mother Tari Ruu was in no way lacking as a wife. Her younger brothers would surely grow into wonderful hunters, too. The eldest of them, Shin Ruu, was already doing a fantastic job hunting alongside their father.

So why couldn't she live dauntlessly like that?

Sheera Ruu was already 18, but not a single man had offered to marry her. That was how pathetic of a woman she was.

That made sense, though. She was no longer forced to stay in bed with illness like when she was young, but she still couldn't even carry a water jug on her

own. She wasn't pretty, either. So why would any member of the forest's edge want her?

The only hope she had was to marry into one of the clans under the Ruu. Small clans like the Ririn, Maam, and Muufa would surely welcome her just for being a Ruu woman. After all, they all served under the Ruu clan.

But then, they were sure to be disappointed. Even if she was a Ruu woman, that didn't mean she held the power of her clan in any way.

Vina and Reina Ruu weren't married yet either, but for them they were surely just waiting for the right man. That just made sense, as they were members of the main house. Surely, there wasn't a man at the forest's edge who would turn down such lovely women as his bride.

But Sheera Ruu was already 18. Three years had passed since she was able to receive such requests. Her house only had her and her mother, but there were plenty of other women in the settlement, so it probably wouldn't be any issue at all if she wasn't around. The time came when she firmed up her resolve, and decided she just had to marry into one of the clans under them already.

But I...

She wanted to stay in the Ruu settlement for just a bit longer.

There was someone whose future she absolutely wanted to watch play out.

If she could see him get married, then surely she could work up the nerve. She could separate herself from her family and leave the Ruu settlement to live somewhere else.

Sheera Ruu lived with such thoughts secretly floating around her mind, but then *they* came to the Ruu settlement: Asuta and Ai Fa of the Fa clan.

"Well, thanks to them, Granny Jiba's been doing a lot better lately," Lala Ruu had told her.

She said that after being invited to the Ruu settlement by Rimee Ruu, they had given the elder Jiba Ruu back the will to live through a single dinner.

For some reason, hearing that caused her to tremble.

"You ate the same meal, didn't you, Lala Ruu? Just what sort of dinner was

it?”

“Hmm, well you see... how should I put it? At any rate, it had a totally unbelievable taste.”

“An unbelievable taste...”

“It was supposedly giba meat, but you would never think it was! The grilled and boiled meat had this really nice, gentle smell... Hmm, I don’t think I can really explain it right.”

“But at any rate, it was really amazing cooking, right?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t feel like coming out and praising it like everyone else! Plus my dad got all angry, saying cooking like that rusts the soul.”

“I see...”

However, less than half a month after that, Lala Ruu visited Sheera Ruu’s house again, looking like she didn’t know what to say.

“Asuta and Ai Fa came to the house again yesterday. And last night’s dinner was just plain delicious, with nothing to complain about... Agh, geez, it’s so frustrating!”

A delicious meal.

Just what must such a thing taste like?

Sheera Ruu felt a strange beating in her chest once again.

Then the very next day, it was announced under the clan head Donda Ruu’s name that Asuta of the Fa clan would man the stove for the Rutim and Min clan wedding.

Asuta started staying at the Ruu settlement five days before the banquet, and on the second day he was there Sheera Ruu was invited to assist him.

“Ah, you’re one of the helpers from the branch families, right? I’m probably going to be asking a lot of you, but I look forward to working together.”

Asuta was a truly unusual man.

He had a slender physique like a woman, and his expressions and overall manner came across as very gentle. His skin was the sort of sunny tan shade she

had seen with folks from the west in the post town, but his eyes and hair were black like someone from the east.

And he felt a bit different from the people of the post town, too. It was hard to say how, but Asuta was a strange person who fit the word “foreigner,” not feeling like anyone else she had ever seen.

On top of that, Sheera Ruu was completely overwhelmed when she first tasted Asuta’s cooking.

Just like Lala Ruu had said, it was hard to describe the giba meat that used that special technique called bloodletting, but it was clearly delicious.

And furthermore, Asuta used fruit wine, pico leaves, and rock salt to bring forth all sorts of new flavors like magic. He didn’t just boil the poitan but instead dried it out and then baked it. Then the poitan-less broth went down nice and easy, plus the vegetables like aria, chatchi, and tarapa were used in a totally different way to create an entirely new dish.

He could do this much, knew this many tricks for manning the stove? Compared to Asuta, what she had done was mere child’s play.

Sheera Ruu kept on silently helping Asuta with such thoughts running through her mind, but...

“Sheera Ruu, you seem really used to handling a knife and managing the flame,” Asuta suddenly stated two days before the banquet. “I was thinking that on the day of the banquet, I would have you and your mother Tari Ruu take charge of preparing the hamburger in the main house’s kitchen.”

The “hamburger” dish that Asuta mentioned was the most difficult to handle out of all the dishes he had come up with. Meat finely chopped, mixed with aria and thickened with poitan, then formed back into a patty and seared in an exact way to trap the juices inside, served with fruit wine sauce.

Sheera Ruu was at a loss for words, but by her side Tari Ruu had a big smile on her face.

“That’s an honor. My daughter is better than anyone at manning the stove, so I guess her skill rubbed off on me a bit as a result.”

“Yes, that’s true. Sheera Ruu, you really are amazing,” Asuta said, also wearing a smile. “I can tell how you’re thinking carefully even about how you cut the meat. So please, lend me your strength.”

Somehow, those words made her feel like she had ascended to the heavens.

Sheera Ruu had never even dreamed someone as wonderfully skilled as Asuta would recognize her abilities at manning the stove.

She was able to surprise her family by incorporating the skills Asuta had taught her into the dinners she prepared, too. Her littlest brothers couldn’t stop exclaiming how delicious it was, and even the untalkative Ryada and Shin Ruu looked incredibly satisfied as they ate.

In that way, she was able to grant her family happiness.

Asuta had once said that he wanted to be a medicine rather than a poison, bringing the people of the forest’s edge greater strength through that joy. He may have been a foreigner, but using that unbelievable strength, he was finding his own place at the forest’s edge. Sheera Ruu couldn’t help but be impressed at his incredible confidence and resolve.

She was undoubtedly a member of the forest’s edge, but all she could do was hesitate and worry. But Asuta made food with every bit as much force to it as a blade, and had his strength acknowledged in turn.

He may have looked weak and soft on the outside, but inside Asuta there was surely pride and bravery that wouldn’t lose out to any of the hunters.

Perhaps...

Perhaps she could live proudly like Asuta, too.

She may have been far weaker than the other women, but she was able to make delicious cooking. So could she take pride in that, and live with her head held high?

Even after the Rutim banquet ended and Asuta left the Ruu settlement, such thoughts still ran through her head.

And when a mere ten more days had passed, Sheera Ruu received another report from Lala Ruu.

“They said they need more people for the shop in the post town! My mom Mia Lea said they were thinking of giving that work to me and you, so what do you say?”

For a moment, Sheera Ruu was left at a loss as to how to respond.

Her thoughts were full of the question of why she would be entrusted with such an important task, as well as joy at the thought of getting to work with Asuta again.

“Apparently Asuta said he wanted at least one woman who was skilled at manning the stove. That’s why you got chosen, Sheera Ruu!”

“But... There’s still Reina Ruu from the main house, isn’t there?”

“Hmm, but the main house is already loaning Vina. If both of the oldest sisters weren’t around, it’d make it real tough to do work around the house, right? So if you turn this down, I’m sure we’ll have to loan out Reina and someone else from a branch family, and ask for help with the work around the main house.”

Sheera Ruu stared at Lala Ruu with eyes full of both excitement and concern. Lala Ruu had completely opened up to Asuta, so she must have asked to help out with the work in the post town.

“Still, it’d be rough for you to have to carry a pot or whatever all the way to town. So it’s up to you to decide what you want to do!”

Sheera Ruu was at a loss. She still wasn’t all that strong. In fact, a little bit of pride had only just started to take root in the depths of her heart. But if that tiny bud wasn’t given the light and water it needed, it would shrivel up and die in no time at all.

And so, Sheera Ruu stared Lala Ruu straight in the eyes the best she could manage and responded, “I’ll do it. Please, let me help out with that work.”

So that she could live proudly like Asuta.

So that she didn’t have to hide away her own feelings.

With such thoughts racing through her mind, Sheera Ruu had firmed up her resolve and taken a step forward.

Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, the fifth volume of “Cooking with Wild Game.”

It feels like it’s been no time at all, but we’re already here at the fifth volume. It’s been roughly three months since the last book was published, but it really did pass in a flash. The focus this time around is a continuation of last time, with the business in the post town taking center stage.

I know some folks like to read the afterword first, so I won’t touch on the details, but I hope you look forward to Asuta’s and everyone’s continued struggle!

I believe I already mentioned this in one of the previous afterwords, but this work was originally serialized on a novel posting site, so I ended up quite conflicted on how to break things up when turning it into a series of novels.

Or to put it another way, when you find a good breaking point in the story, it can end up far too short on characters or even go significantly over, so how to revise things has been a significant concern. With this volume in particular, I had to shave off several tens of thousands of characters. Or talking in terms of pages, it was around 46 pages worth that I cut.

Of course, when doing the web version I just wrote what came to mind, so my descriptions ended up being overly verbose. I especially hated that part of my writing, so I feel like cutting that down certainly had a positive effect.

But with the number of characters I needed to cut, that obviously wasn’t enough, so I had to cut a certain conversation entirely. It wasn’t absolutely necessary for the volume, but if I get the opportunity, I would like to try to insert it next time. I also tweaked a number of other passages, until finally arriving at the current slimmed down version.

Still, cutting the enjoyment brought by the book along with the number of words would be a real shame, and an example of misplaced priorities, so this

made for a rather tricky job. I believe I did my best to ensure the folks reading the novel version for the first time and those who already read the web version get the same amount of joy from the story, but how would you say I did?

If you could see even a bit of the fruits of my effort, then I would feel truly blessed.

And as for the bonus short story, as you may have guessed it stars the character referred to by its title. She had already been introduced in the past, but this time around she was brought to life through a color illustration for the first time, which brought me a great deal of satisfaction.

I had no idea when I was first planning things out that that character would end up so thoroughly entwined in the story. She may not be as flashy as the four daughters of the main Ruu house, but I still hope that she's earned your favor.

I'll also use this opportunity to inform you that the concept behind the covers will be changing from this volume on. It will still be like taking a snapshot of a single scene like before, but from now on the plan is to bring the scene even further to life.

Up till last time the idea was to craft a scene that could have appeared in the volume, but I've decided to become less fixated on that restriction. Or to be more precise, a scene like the one on this volume's cover doesn't happen this time around.

It may be possible in the future, but at the very least it doesn't appear in the book itself. That was how we made the cover.

From here on out, I also intend to try to produce even stronger imagery by not being so fixated on the contents of the book itself.

For example, the first volume had Asuta and Ai Fa. The reason Asuta doesn't have the towel wrapped around his head is to make it clear what sort of face he's making, and they're both wearing shoes indoors in order to emphasize the sort of clothing they wear.

A book's cover is like its face, so I think it's always very important to keep in mind the sort of image you're presenting.

And so this time around, we went with a scene of Rimee and Lala Ruu from the forest's edge enjoying a meal together with Tara, who is from the town.

Please, keep on watching over them to see whether or not such a peaceful future ends up arriving.

Now then... As always, let me finish by giving thanks to my editor at Hobby Japan, my illustrator Kochimo, everyone else involved with the production of this book, and of course all of you who purchased it.

I hope to see you all again with the next volume!

November 2015,
EDA

Bonus Glossary of Otherworld Ingredients

Meats

Giba

A large boar-like animal with a pair of horns and large tusks. Highly aggressive. They breed rapidly, and are prone to wild swings in population size. As a result, if they are not kept in check, they will often spread beyond their native forests, causing serious damage to property and crops. A major pest species.

Usually, only the leg meat of a giba is collected, because the people of the forest's edge are expected to hunt frequently in order to keep the population in check. If properly preserved in pico, the leg meat will last more than long enough for a single person to use it up if eating normally.

Giba meat is a deep red, and has a potent stench if not properly bloodlet immediately. It is traditionally prepared by slicing chunks off the bone in haphazard manner, and then boiling it at high temperature for 20 minutes to make a stew. However, preparing it in this way results in the meat becoming soft and slimy on the surface, while still remaining extremely tough and sinewy on the inside. It makes for an unpleasant meal, especially for the very young and old. It can also be dried out using lilo and eaten as a jerky, though it will still be as tough as rubber.

In order to bring out the full potential of this ingredient, a more laborious cooking process is needed. The meat must be simmered at a medium temperature for approximately 80 minutes. This softens the meat all the way through without overcooking the surface to the point that it becomes mushy. In the end, you will have a meat with a rich, quirky flavor that some may find overpowering, but which is just as delicious as pork or beef.

Alternatively, the meat may be minced and made into a hamburger meat patty using dissolved poitan as a thickening agent, to be served either steak

style or sandwich style with aria, tarapa, or fruit wine sauce. The giba's own fat is used to keep the patty from sticking to the pan as it fries at high temperature. The meat does not become overly soft because it is not submerged in water. This is a more difficult method of preparation, due to the thickness of the pots used by the people of the forest's edge and the simplicity of their stoves making temperature regulation difficult. A thin patty may be quick baked using a single pot, but if a family has multiple pots that may be heated to different levels, the second may be used to more slowly cook the patties to the center after the surface has been seared.

Karon

An animal with meat that tastes similar to beef. Back and rib meat is especially prized, and is difficult for the average person to afford. In most markets, only leg meat is sold. It is said to be delicious, but it can be overly tough if not cut thinly and stewed thoroughly.

Kimyuus

An animal with white meat similar to processed chicken. Relatively cheap. It lays eggs which are also used as food. Commonly grilled, roasted, or fried with the skin still attached—considered a particularly delicious treat when prepared in the latter way. Its flavor is mild and simple, so it is easily overpowered by any vegetables and spices it is served with.

Fruits & Vegetables

Aria

A layered vegetable resembling a bulb onion in appearance, but lacking the eye-burning chemicals contained in onions. It is vibrantly green in color both inside and out. When cooked for only a short time, it has a crisp crunchiness and very little flavor. Heating for around 20 minutes will cause it to soften and become sweeter. It is a common ingredient in a wide variety of dishes because it is cheap and provides all the nutrition one would need from a vegetable.

Chatchi

A fruit with an outer layer like a yellow-skinned orange, beneath which is a fleshy lump with the taste and texture of a sweet potato. When cooked thoroughly, it breaks down into soft chunks, somewhat resembling mashed potatoes. If not fully cooked, the core will remain solid and crunchy.

Fuwano

A grain used to make a sort of soft but dense flatbread, which can be wrapped, molded, and stuck together to make a meat bun, burrito, or pot pie-like dish. Does not keep as well as poitan.

Gigo

A plant that grows massive tubers over two meters in length. Has a flavor that has charitably been described as “mellow” or alternatively as “boring.” It breaks down when boiled to make a thick stew, and while it has little taste of its own, it can also suppress the unpleasant taste and texture of poitan. When added to baked poitan, the resulting bread is softer and fluffier, somewhat more closely resembling a yeast bread.

Lilo

An herb that is used along with pico to make smoked giba jerky. It has a potent aroma that effectively covers up the stink of raw giba meat, and is sometimes used to make the meat more palatable.

Myamuu

A vegetable that grows in long, thin, green stalks. Cannot be eaten raw, as it is excessively spicy, but this is lost when it is cooked. When properly prepared, tastes like a cross between garlic and a bit of cilantro. It does not smell as strongly as garlic, though. Can be cut up and mashed into a paste that works well as an ingredient in a wide variety of sauces and marinades.

Pico

When pico leaves are dried, they turn black and crumble into a coarse powder easily. This powder is used as an extraordinarily effective preservative for giba meat, drawing out moisture and preventing the onset of decay. When

submerged in pico, giba meat will last up to three weeks, even in the hot and humid conditions at the forest's edge. If properly maintained by stirring regularly, a batch of pico will remain effective for up to a month before needing to be replaced. Pico is slightly spicy, and can be used as a seasoning like pepper. Along with lilo, it can also be used to make smoked giba jerky.

Poitan

A poitan resembles a potato in size and shape, but in actuality it is an immense grain berry, and provides all of a person's dietary needs for grain. It dissolves readily in water, creating a broth that tastes like raw flour, requiring ingredients with very strong tastes to cover it up enough to make a palatable soup.

Though it is a grain, its tendency to agglutinate is very weak. In order to produce anything that even resembles bread out of it, a specific procedure must be followed. First, the poitan must be heated in a proportionately small amount of water until it is dissolved, in order to make a thick, mushy broth. This must be further heated to the point of almost burning in order to reduce the water content, until it becomes a sort of batter. Drying this batter under sunlight will finally produce a dense flatbread that easily pulls apart, but is at least strong enough to make a sandwich with. A small amount of gigo can be added during the heating process to make this flatbread a little softer and fluffier.

Pula

A green vegetable shaped like a ginkgo leaf, but with thickness to it. It is bitter, but if cut into small pieces it can pleasantly accent other tastes.

Romu

A medicinal herb, with pitch-black leaves shaped like those of a maple tree. Reduces pain and fever. A single leaf made into a tea is an effective dose for an adult.

Tarapa

A red fruit about as big as a small pumpkin, with a similar ribbed skin and

internal structure. It has a tomato-like flavor, though with a somewhat stronger sourness when raw. When combined with aria, pico, and fruit wine for sweetness, it produces a strong tomato stew that can even overcome the flouriness of poitan. A sort of ketchup can also be made from it.

Tino

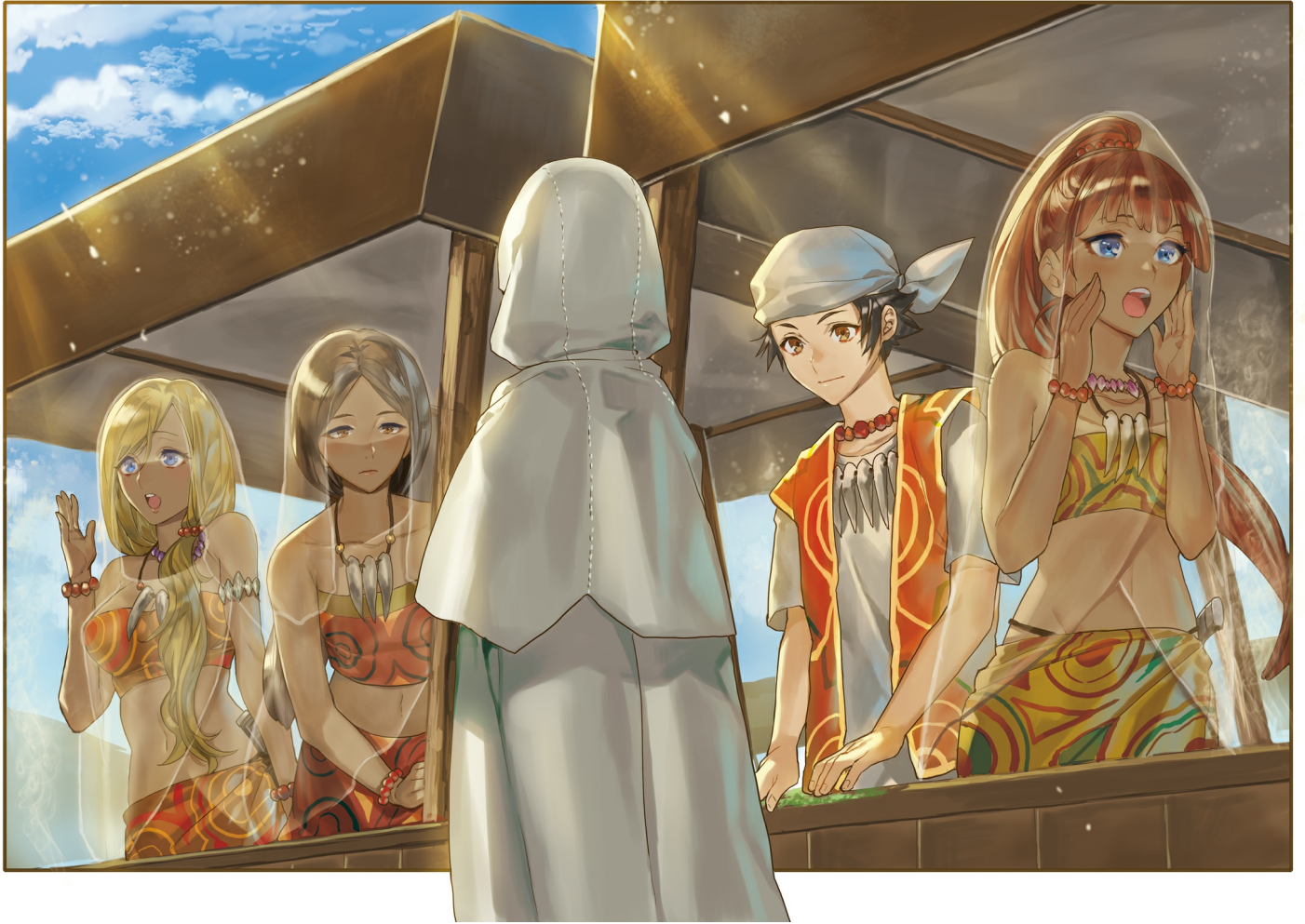
A large green vegetable that looks like a rose made of cabbage or lettuce leaves. It has very little flavor, but can be used as a garnish, or to add a pleasant bit of fresh crispness to a chewing experience.

Zozo

A strongly aromatic plant that looks like a coiling beehive. It is not medicinal, but smells like medicine. The people of the forest's edge use it as a soup ingredient to cover up the smell of giba meat, while the townsfolk make it into a tea. Zozo tea is mildly bitter, but smooth and pleasant to drink.











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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 5

by EDA

Translated by Matthew Warner Edited by Adam Fogle

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